



TOUCH POINT

Water and Spirit – Touchpoint for May 22, 2024

John 3:10-17 (NRSVUE)

¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[c]

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Grace and peace to you from the Mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.

Jesus had a fidelity and affinity for something greater animating his life. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, wanted it. He was seeing a man engage the world as he healed the hurting. Legalistic Nicodemus must have felt naughty as he spoke to Jesus late at night and in private, like an adolescent teen leaving a Christian school’s abstinence class. He needed to know the truth and he needed to know now.

I imagine Jesus had this effect on a lot of people. Perhaps it was less about believing in Jesus as being God, and more about experiencing this presence of God in Jesus. That’s what Nicodemus reports.

Jesus likens being born from above to physical birth. We were not fully conscious and aware of birth. We were caught up in this amniotic fluid before we arrived, swimming in the unknown wonderment of enveloping love. We just went with the flow.

Isn’t that what this is all about? It’s bigger than being conscious and fully aware before the birth of our flesh.

So, it is like being born from above. We are not fully aware of the enveloping love of Spirit. The wind blows and we float hither and thither. We are not born again. Like our mother, Spirit held space for us. Maybe like Nicodemus, we just take things too literally. We use phrases like ‘born again’ instead of born from above, or anew.

“To be born anew is to undergo such a radical change that it is like a new birth; it is to have something happen to the soul which can only be described as being born all over again; and the whole process is not a human achievement, because it comes from the grace and power of God.” – *William Barclay*

Nicodemus has a great predicament. His heart longed for this idea of freedom if he could just make sense of it. But here he was, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin who a) oversaw keeping the thousands of policies and protocols created by the scribes to keep the laws, and b) kept an eye out for false prophets.

In spiritual direction, I see this in all people who feel their hearts drawing them into a new way of thinking and being. When they listen deeply to Spirit, it is typical to feel conflicted. The potential call to leave a place of embedded privilege, false protection or chosen philosophy is scary. Everything would be new and seemingly out of our control. But like Nicodemus, there is an excitement, but with it comes a departure from our comfortable kingdoms.

In my life, I've come to believe it takes more courage to leave something, than to create or join something. However, when we let something go – an old belief system, affiliation or addiction – we are in turn giving ourselves to something. It may be a new adventure, occupation, or simply a pause to discern the next steps in life.

Perhaps this is what Nicodemus is experiencing in his heart's longing.

Being saved from doing a million little compulsive duties sounds wonderful! But it can also feel like the ground we built beneath our feet is shaking. For Nicodemus, this must have felt very scary, especially when Jesus implies it is impossible to do on your own. You can't wave incense, follow an altar call, be baptized, be the pastor's friend, read the Bible, or listen only to K-LOVE radio. You can't take communion, confess all your sins or raise a flag to win God's favor. It is so beyond our human and religious means that Jesus is saying, "Nico, just like when you were a fetus, the water held you till birth. In the same way God loves you and Spirit is holding you until you believe anew."

Maybe to those who are desperate, weary and have tried everything else, the invitation to "follow me" is a drop-my-fishing-net-and-go moment, the directional change they needed.

To those who believe they can remain somewhat in control and avoid uncertainty, they are not ready to be born anew. But Spirit holds them like amniotic fluid until they are ready.

I'm reminded of the interaction the rich young ruler had with Jesus in Mark 10:17-27, in which the young man was in a position similar to Nicodemus. He had very high status, but his investment wasn't in his religion, it was in land wealth. He liked what he saw in Jesus, and like Nicodemus, was similarly intrigued with the Divine presence he saw in Jesus. The young ruler asked Jesus a similar question as Nicodemus: "What would I need to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded, "Sell everything you own, give the money to the poor and follow me."

The writer of Mark says the rich young ruler turned and walked sadly away because he owned a lot of stuff. He used the word, *inherit*. To inherit implies some sort of privilege. Nicodemus and the rich young ruler were trapped by their investment in an identity based on works and wealth. Jesus told them both that the spiritual birth is not born this way. He showed both of them that the kind of life they were looking for cannot happen if they are unwilling to let go of everything they'd made themselves to be. It is something that must be birthed in Spirit, where our capacity is no match for that of God.

Our creative energy pales in comparison to the creativity of Spirit. Nicodemus was so very insightful to know that what he witnessed could not happen separately from the presence of God. The rich ruler may have thought if he knelt before Jesus, Jesus would give him the birthright and maybe show him the map to the Fountain of Youth. Both rulers are being told that the only way is to walk away, sell everything, come down from their lofty positions and listen to the inner call of Spirit. The kingdom of heaven, the Spirit of life, was drawing out their deepest desire to belong.

Nicodemus, you must leave your place of judgment; Richie Rich, you must invest in the marginalized. By identifying with the poor, the homeless, the widowed, you are giving your privilege to the marginalized.

By joining the journey of Spirit's unfolding mystery, our innermost being is birthed.

If Mark Twain was right when he said, "The two most important days of your life are when you are born and when you find out why," then Jesus was only half right. I think Jesus is saying the two most important days are birth by water and birth by Spirit. To be born of Spirit is to come before God unclothed, free of all the coverings we've created to identify ourselves and give us worth.

When we are born into this world, there is no turning back. We thrust into knowing ourselves and knowing the world around us. In the same way, to be born of Spirit is to embark on a forever life of knowing God in myself, in others and in the world.

To learn and follow the revelation of God's compassion, we must be awakened from our slumber. We may need to let go of our created attachments. It takes great surrender to be birthed anew, surrendering to deepest desire of our soul for connection with Spirit. If we don't slow down and take the longer scenic route, we will burn out and hide in the shadows, looking for good reason and guaranteed outcomes before surrendering to Spirit's work. Jesus doesn't offer either good reason or guaranteed outcomes to Nicodemus or Richie Rich. Just birth.

They were both in their own way earnestly seeking. Why didn't Jesus acknowledge their desire and baptize them? Why didn't he put his hands on the kneeling ruler and bless him? If hell hung precariously in the balance of their decision to follow Jesus, why wouldn't Jesus tell them? Perhaps it's because Nicodemus and the Rich Young Ruler represents today's church, who just can't let go of their way, to follow The Way.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. – John 3:16

In the same way, God loved the world we know and revealed himself through the birth of a person they called Son of God. He embodied the very revelation of the compassion of God. By this Jesus showed us that we too embody the Spirit of God. If we don't believe it, there's nothing left but our finite ego to guide us.

Amen.

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be still, know that I am God

Calm Me, Lord

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.
Still me Lord, keep me from harm.
Let all the tumult within me cease.
Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Come Drink of Living Water

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Come drink of living water. Never thirst again.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Monastery Choir of St. John of San Francisco)

Benediction

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

(National Lutheran Choir, feat. Peter C. Lutkin)

The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord lift his countenance upon you... And give you peace...
The Lord make his face to shine upon you... And be gracious unto you...
The Lord be gracious unto you. Amen.