

Sermon Draft
Text: John 3:1-21
Sermon: Trinity Sunday 2018

Sometimes what we think is most familiar is also the most unknown. Take the case of one Midwest family. The matriarchs of the family had passed along a time-honored recipe for the traditional Easter ham. Along with the list of spices and herbs, rubs and glazes, cook times and basting procedures, was the absolutely strict instruction that the last three to four inches of the ham must be cut off — completely removed. This order was an integral part of the recipe that their great-grandmother had passed down. Grandma continued the practice, as did her granddaughter.

When the great-granddaughter was initiated into the secret recipe, she dared to ask “Why?” Why the necessary amputation of the end of that holiday ham. Neither her mother nor her grandmother had an answer. Thankfully, great-grandma was still around and had a perfectly logical, if unexpected explanation for the recipe detail.

“My roasting pan was too short,” great grandma declared, “I had to cut off the last few inches or the ham would not fit in the pan.”

Although the conditions had changed for the ensuing generations of cooks, they had all continued to follow the old instructions, without knowing why, without embracing the new reality made possible by bigger pans for bigger hams.

It is easy to get comfortable, to get in a rut. Thinking “outside the box” requires flexing some mental muscles, pushing out the walls of thoughts and expectations we find reassuring and familiar. There is perhaps no more faith-defining expression in Western Christianity than the concept of being “born again.” After two millennia it is a phrase that is so familiar it has become unknown.

In the first century, to the Pharisee Nicodemus, Jesus’ insistence that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” sounded utterly bizarre. The term Jesus used to describe this required rebirth was “anothen,” a word that had two distinct meanings.

“Anothen” could be understood to mean “again,” or it could mean “above.” “Anothen” had both a horizontal (this-world) and a vertical (heavenly) connotation.

Ironically, the phrase that eventually has been most claimed by evangelical Christians, “born again,” is exactly how Nicodemus notoriously misunderstood the term. Nicodemus sarcastically responded, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Nicodemus was a learned religious scholar, a Pharisee, a savvy leader in the Jewish community, most likely a member himself of the Sanhedrin. There is no doubt that he was completely familiar with the dual meaning of “anothen.” But Nicodemus simply could not accept any way of entering into the kingdom, of experiencing God’s presence, other than adherence to the Torah.

By clinging to the literal, Nicodemus sought security and refuge in his old belief system which protected him from the notion that God had sent a new presence into the world, a new possibility, Jesus the Christ.

To the left-brain literal mind, the metaphor of being “born again” was nonsensical.

The modern mapping of the human brain’s activities has revealed that our brains have learned to delegate. The brain itself has two hemispheres, divided by a membranous cartilage, essentially we have a “left brain” and a “right brain.” This division is not a “what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas” kind of segregation. There is always intimate communication between the two halves. But these two spheres of the brain each have their own strengths and weaknesses.

The “left brain” houses the home team advantage for logical, rational, sequential thought processes. The right brain gives intuitive, reactionary, environmental responses the upper hand. Together these dual strengths have given us astonishing advances in science, the beauty of art, structures for politics and power, and the magic of music.

John 3 reveals Nicodemus as the patron saint of left-brained people. Nicodemus' literal response to Jesus' declaration that the coming of God's kingdom required the faithful to be born again, reveals someone totally stuck in left-brain gear.

When Jesus announces that God is working in a new way, through the "water" of the new birth and through the winds of a new spirit, Nicodemus cannot get beyond the rational literalism of his left brain, and utters one of the most uncomprehending statements in all of the Bible: "How can this be? Must I enter my mother's womb a second time and be born?" While Nicodemus is stuck in left-brain mode, Jesus talks in whole brain.

We know that being born "anowen" requires a whole new perspective on faith and life. But even as the church has claimed the "born again" label, we are still stuck in Nicodemus mode. We still want to limit our faith to logic and rationality, to what we think and intellectually comprehend.

That is why churches have more by-laws than by-products. That is why we cling to doctrines and dogmas instead of promises and possibilities. That is why “church” is a noun, not a verb.

Hope for right-brained people comes from the fact that Nicodemus eventually defended Jesus in John 7: 50-51, and ultimately joined with Joseph of Arimathea in claiming Jesus’ body, providing the Messiah with a respectable burial. Nicodemus might not have given up being a Pharisee. He embraced the message and mission of Jesus and dared to be registered on the radar of both Jewish and Roman ire both by defending Jesus and by helping to claim the body of an executed criminal of the Empire. Nicodemus had finally “let go” of his former worldview with its boundaries and barriers.

“Letting go” is what Christians need to embrace every day of their lives. Instead of trusting in “make-sense” reason and sensible logic, we need to trust equally in our sense of awe, our sense of mystery, our sense of beauty, our sense of the divine. “Letting go” is what disciples of Jesus should do best.

For those who profess faith in Jesus as the Christ, we have to “let it go” of the notion that God is only known through power and might, strictures and scriptures, and not through wind and water. We have to let go of the idea that triumph is not accomplished through trust and truth. We have to let go of the conviction that we can do enough right to be righteous. We have to let go of the fiction that we are good without God. You might say the very essence of discipleship is “letting go.”

Like the song says, “Let it Go.” In many ways, the “Let it Go” theme of Frozen is the story of Nicodemus. Jesus is encouraging Nicodemus and the Nicodemus in all of us to “Let It Go.” We must let go of our control, let go of our fear, let go of our cold certainty and yield to God’s Spirit.

First, let go of our fear. Why does Nicodemus come in the dead of night? He’s afraid. Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews, a member of the great Sanhedrin, a senator, a privy-counsellor, a man of authority in Jerusalem. Yet he calls Jesus rabbi. He is curiously drawn to Jesus, and even admits that Jesus must be of God.

But it wouldn't be cool to be seen with Jesus in the light of day, so he comes under the cloak of darkness. Jesus was willing to meet with Nicodemus in the dark even when Nicodemus wasn't willing to come out into the open.

Jesus challenges the fear of Nicodemus. Jesus challenges him to go deeper in faith, beyond ritual habits, beyond rational beliefs, beyond the safe and predictable, and to step fearlessly "into the light."

Love and relationships must trump fear. Spirit is everything. Jesus challenges Nicodemus to enter into a new dimension, to be born of the Spirit, to trump his fear and allow his spirit to be changed. But to open ourselves up to the mystery of the Holy Spirit, we must let go of our fear of the unknown, the untested, the unexamined.

Second, let go of our control. Control is the major thing that prevents us from "stepping to the right." We are such control addicts, our discipleship classes ought to be called AA meetings, 12 steps to make us Alive and Aware. In our gospel today, Jesus is doing an intervention with Nicodemus, helping to make him alive and aware.

In the movie Frozen, Elsa's obsessive control prevents her from freeing up her gift to be the healing and loving touch it was meant to be. Nicodemus's ice is his rationality, his left-brained logic and control. He is stuck in a left-brain paradigm. If we dwell only in our left brain, that is a very cold place indeed. Our left brain is our place of cold rationality. Our right brain is our place of hot relationality. Warmth comes from bringing the hot and the cold together, the warm place where we feel ourselves open to the mystery and creativity of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus challenges Nicodemus to be born anew, of water and wind, to let go of all the status he has attained through all his education and politics. Jesus challenges Nicodemus to let go not just of the past but of his present "concealment" of his discipleship. To trust the water and the wind is to let the "storms" come as they will, to trust in God's protection, and to "dare" to make faith not just about rationality and rules but about relationships and emotions. When we let go of everything, we discover, we truly have everything.

When God's spirit blows new life into our lives, the results are unpredictable. Part of the image of the wind “blowing where it wills” is the challenge to stop clinging to certainty and predictability. Jesus is telling Nicodemus to “Let it go,” to take the risk of faith, to be vulnerable and open and surrender to the Spirit.

Are you willing to let it go this morning and let God?
Did you know all babies are born with clenched fists. Growing up is the process of relaxing your hand, unfurling your fingers, and opening your heart...in love and relationship.

We are born with a grasping reflex. We have to learn a yielding reflex...to let go of control, let go of fear, and let go of certainty.

Let it go and let God.

Amen