

Double Speak

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2nd Sunday of Lent

John 3:1-17

“...no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above”

Today we find ourselves with a rich, multi-layered text that can be read, and has been read in many, many ways; there is not just one way to understand this passage. But today, as we engage, enter into, and become a part of the story I would invite all of you to think about control. Think about the way Nicodemus may have been trying to control who Jesus was, and what the role of the Spirit was. Think about the way churches, groups and individuals try to control and force what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Today I invite you to think about your own need and desires for control.

We want to feel safe, don't we? We want to feel secure, don't we? We want to know that we will be able to rest our head on the same pillow that we rose from in a similar or better state. As Whitehead said, “we want to live, and live better.” But there are many variables, many “what ifs,” and many things that can happen in a day, and our feelings of safety and security melt with faced with all of the possibilities. In the television show, *Monk*, the main character is a detective who is obsessive compulsive and has a high degree of anxiety over the “what ifs.” If there is anything that can go wrong, he will think of, concoct, and create the scenarios in his head. Such a high degree of anxiety is enhanced with his obsessive compulsive drive to control and order everything. He is careful about what he touches, how his clothes are laid out, the arrangement of his office, down to the last detail. Of course this makes him a very difficult person to be around, but his thinking is that if everything can be accounted for and predicted and controlled, than he will feel safe, or at least somewhat at ease.

We laugh at the exaggeration of the television character, but there is a truth which emerges from this show. We want to feel like we are in control so we can feel safe. Do you remember one of the big changes that happened in American life after 9/11? Transportation across the US, the way in which we travel changed, especially in the airline industry. In order to feel safe, we had to raise the level of control over who went on the plane, what he or she carried, and how we check the individual, and which individuals we check. The amount of control over getting on the plane increased in order to obtain a degree of security and safety.

Many people who don't like to fly at all claim that they feel out of control when they do, and thus don't feel safe. The author Douglas Adams once wrote that the secret of flying is to forget that you are falling, because when you fall you feel as if you are out of control. Yet when you forget and control your own thoughts – then you are no longer falling. In my humble opinion, the problem is not the falling, but not being able to control how you land. Regardless, I don't encourage you try a control experiment in falling in order to test your control issues. But we do want to control everything from our neighborhood (including who lives their) to our work place, to our friends, and even our churches so we will feel as if we know what is going to happen; so we don't feel out of control. In our search for safety and security we become like an overprotective parent, controlling every aspect of the child's life to keep the child safe, and we are that child just as we are that parent. But we still strive to force our ideals and lifestyles upon others and upon our own lives so that we can feel in control. When we are in control, we feel safe.

We see this desire for control in search of security in all parts of our life, including our faith. In churches a lot of what we do is what we have been doing because it is the way things have been done in the past. Maybe there is a better, more efficient way to be a church, maybe there is a new way to worship God that holds some integrity and offers space for some creativity, but at least we know what to expect with our tried and true ways. There is some security and safety in that knowing, and tried way. The Pharisees were pushing an understanding of the faith that was legalistic, tried and true, as it had been when Jerusalem was in its glory during the second reign of the temple. They believed that the right way to follow God was to follow God's law closely as had been done in the past. This was their truth, and they were compelled to hold to this predictable truth they had come to embrace and pass on through history. This is the context out of which we find Nicodemus.

And how often have we seen churches, movements, and faiths fall into a truth holding, chest beating contest as the Pharisees did with other Jews? “My truth is better than yours!” we yell and holler at each other. Presbyterian claiming

predestination, Methodists claim perfection, Catholics claiming the real presence, and Baptist just looking for a fight, all hold their known, safe tradition as the best way to be a Christian. I had a professor who came from a family of Evangelical Conservatives who would get into large arguments if the rapture was going to be Pre-Tribulation or Post-Tribulation. Does anyone care? But we get into these arguments. We argue about church discipline, about theology, and about the correct and incorrect way to read the Bible. But what it really is about is control and power. If I win, then my idea rules, then I have control, I have power, and at long last I will feel safe. In the Baptist movement this is a huge difficulty because we hold up the idea of Church and individual autonomy. We hold up the freedom of the individual and of the local worshipping community. This means that each church is free to discern how it is going to follow Jesus as a community – and this means we cannot have a monopoly of ideologies and theologies, but a plurality and diversity as a people. Yet we often find ourselves running with Nicodemus and the Pharisees, claiming to have the truth and driving that truth with a renewed zealotry. Those who claim to have the truth about Christ and about God become like a bull running headstrong, regardless of others, pushing his or her ideas without consideration or thought or listening. This appeal for the “right” belief and the “correct” understanding of Christianity is an insidious drive within churches yearning for control and security.

Yet Christ stops the bull, Christ stops the desire and need to control, he challenges our security with ambiguity, unknowing, and reminds us of his love for all of us. Into the night, Christ meets with Nicodemus and Christ uses challenging rhetoric and double speak to shake his foundations and assumptions. Nicodemus comes on behalf of the Pharisees, he comes claiming to finally understand Jesus, to know exactly who Jesus is and what Jesus represents. Nicodemus has put Jesus in a box which is safe and predictable in his own mind. Jesus has done amazing things; he has shown signs that point to the divine, so Jesus must be from God. There is no other way to understand how Jesus can perform such miraculous signs, so he is like a prophet, or a priest who is sent and guided by God. Nicodemus comes in from the night, from the world, meets with Jesus, and has the audacity to claim and demand who Jesus is.

His ideas are safe and comfortable and known, and something that can be understood and controlled. But Jesus does not accept the category, or even the terms of discourse. Nicodemus says, “I know who you are,” and Jesus answers with his double speak; “Whoever wishes to see the kingdom must be born *again*.” But at the same time, Jesus says, “Whoever wishes to see the kingdom of God must be born from *above*.” So which is it, above or again? Is it a physical birth or a spiritual birth? It can only be one or the other, right? So Nicodemus makes the choice, and decides what Jesus must mean – it is a physical birth, it must be a physical birth, and hence his incredulity, because no one can enter the womb and be born a second time, right? (A forced reading is a flawed reading) But Jesus doesn’t just correct Nicodemus, Jesus doesn’t clarify what he meant, but adds to Nicodemus’ confusion. “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and *wind/Spirit*” Again we have this use of the of double speak. So now what is it? Is it wind or is it the spirit. Because wind is connected to life, the word for wind is often life, but the Spirit is connected to the divine. So is this physical or spiritual? Is this of human working or of divine? What Jesus is suggesting is unknown, it is unsure, and it can be scary because Jesus is not clear – and that is where he stays. Nicodemus tries to control Jesus’ words and ideas, he tries to force Jesus’ identity and keep the holy in a tidy little theological box, but it can’t be done. And we join him as we read this passage and force our own ideas of baptism, our own ideas of salvation, our own ideas of who Jesus is, and our own ideas of living the Christian life onto the text. Baptist hold up this text as a dictate for believer’s baptism by full immersion. Many read this text as a dictate for a full spiritual conversion experience. But Jesus challenges us to add layers onto our theological cake, add depth to our faith, and to open ourselves to the movement of the Spirit.

Now hold on, Pastor, you may be saying, what is the right way to read this text? What is the accepted interpretation? There is no right way or accepted interpretation. It must be read as born *from above* and born *again* at the same time. The wind and the Spirit are both to be understood as correct interpretations at the same time. It is a both/and, not an either/or – that that is where the depth of this text is found. The text is deliberately vague and confusing, and we cannot favor one interpretation over the other. They must be held in balance, in tension. Christ challenges our arrogance and our pride to claim to understand who and what he is about. Christ challenges our presumptions to be able to explain the rich scripture in a simple way, to claim to be able to control the word of the Lord, or to claim to know all of the answers. As he did for Nicodemus, Christ challenges our need to control; Christ shakes the foundation of our knowledge and invites us into the unknown realm of faith.

Do you see, he is calling Nicodemus and he is calling all of us to let go of our need to control and allow God to lead us as we need to be led. Christ is calling us to drop our agendas, or certainty and our temporal knowledge so that we can be filled and led where and how God wants us to be led and filled. The Spirit, the wind, blows where it will, and we must be open to it. We can’t decide, no, we must not decide what the right way is to listen to and understand the scriptures. Instead we must hear the scripture and allow it to interpret us, challenge us, and change us. We can’t look at the story and say what the right and wrong response; instead we must respond from where we are and who we are, and where God is. It is like listening to a provocative piece of music or looking at a provocative work of art. You can’t claim

what the message is, what the music or art means. All you can do is experience it, respond to it, and allow it to move you. Look at the work that Christo and his wife have done in New York City. (The “Gates”) What does it mean, why did he do it, and how are we supposed to understand it? These are questions of control, questions of safety and security. These are questions that come from a desire to find a firm ground. No, instead we are to just experience the work, allow it to move us and challenge us. That is how we are to approach not just this text, but the entire Bible – in a way that we cannot explain, only experience. The Bible is not a simple rules of dictates and doctrines for us to memorize and follow like mindless robots. The Bible is the story, our story of a people struggling to be God’s people. We cannot force such a dynamic text into one box or another, no matter how uncomfortable that may make us. Christ will not allow Nicodemus to force an understanding of faith onto him or God, nor will Christ allow us to force an understanding of faith onto the message of the Gospel and onto God.

Think about it in this church. If we want to be a vibrant church, we can adopt a program that other churches have used, we can become a carbon copy of another church, we can try to force who we want to be. We would be controlling how we want to grow, who we are going to be as we grow, and where we will end up. It is pretty safe, it carries a lot of security. But we won’t be led by Christ, because Christ does not give us control and security, Christ calls us to risk, and to sacrifice. No, we start with us today, we start with who we are right now, we start with prayer, and we wait for the movement of the Spirit. This is risky, because we don’t know how things are going to end up. We don’t know what way we will go, and how. There is not a lot of security in giving up so much control, but that is what Christ is calling all of us to do. To be born again, to be born from above by Spirit and wind. The Spirit will blow where it will, and we will be challenged and changed in ways that God sees fit. We will go through radical transformations that we cannot control, interpret or predict. We cannot control how we be a church, all we can do is just that, be a church.

So we have to drop our agendas, we have to tear down our walls of truth claiming the shoulds and oughts. We have to shed all that holds us down and go before our Lord, claiming, “here we are, Lord, use us as you see fit. Change us as you see fit.” Are we to be born again or from above? Are we to be filled with wind or the Spirit? The answer is yes, by the mercy and the grace of God, yes.

But don’t give up on the scriptures, for Jesus paves the way we will walk, and the hope we will find with the rest of the discourse that he offers to Nicodemus. He calls us to let go of the earthly things like power, control, and the desire to be right. Let go of the earthly things like wealth and prestige. Let go of living in the darkness, and live in the light. Follow the Son of God; follow the one who challenges all the assumptions, who doesn’t destroy those against him, but allows himself to be lifted up so that we all can be saved from ourselves. This isn’t how it is supposed to end – it isn’t an end in glory, this isn’t the scripted end that the Pharisees write, that we write, but it is keeping with words of Christ. Just as we are challenged in our birth/baptism, we are challenged in our discipleship, and to the end where Jesus leads. Christ does not go to glory, but to the cross in complete submission. Christ ends with defeat and we are to walk with him. Not to condemn, but to love. Not to prove that he is right, but to show where we can go. Not to send people to hell, but to bring people into the arms of God. This is who, where, and what Jesus brings into the world through the defeat of the cross.

So what are we to do as Christians? Just live with Christ. What should our agenda be? To live with Christ. How can we control, focus, and direct our efforts? By living with Christ. Know that this is unsafe, it is uncontrolled and it will lead to our own defeat. But that is where Christ goes, that is where we all are led. No political agenda, theological agenda, or social agenda can change the end – Christ must die, and we can’t save him. So let’s go with him, into the unknown, into the glory. The double speak of Christ calls you into the death and into the life at the same time. Will you walk with Jesus, will you be born again, from above, filled with the life, and the Spirit? Will you look up at the Son of Humanity lifted up so that you can be cleansed and loved? Will you allow yourself to fall back into those baptismal water, and let go of control, trusting that God will catch you, and bring you up again a new person? Will you give up control and give your life to Jesus? To that unpredictable, that unknown path of suffering, of hardship, of love and ultimately of Glory? Let God in, let God lead, and let God be the one to guide us.

AMEN