**Old Hearts and New Life**

**John 3:1-8**

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 You may not realize it, but we are packing in a lot of celebration this weekend. First, in the Christian calendar, it is the weekend we celebrate the mystery of God in three – the Trinity. Theologians throughout history have tried to explain what that means and usually fall short – appropriately so, because it is a mystery. God is bigger than our thoughts, wishes or imagination. What we do know is that we experience God as creator of all that is. We experience God as the one who provides redemption so that the whole creation may fellowship as one with God, and we experience God as the source and power that helps us live with the values of God’s realm – Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer – God in three, the Trinity

 We also missed celebrating the fact that last week was Pentecost. Fifty days after the resurrection the Holy Spirit was given to the church, animating the followers of Jesus so that they could continue the redemptive ministry of Christ.

 We also celebrate in the United Methodist Church the fact that it is Peace with Justice weekend. The weekend that we give honor to those who died in war - Memorial Day Weekend. We also seek new avenues where people dying in war will be a thing of the past because we seek avenues of peace through just and fair treatment and relationships of all humans.

 That last one was a bit of a twofer, because I snuck in the fact that this weekend we indeed celebrate Memorial Weekend – at time to honor those who served this country and died doing so. We have our own little celebration remembering those in our fellowship who have died this year and were interred in the Memorial Garden. It’s something we will do immediately after this service this morning.

 And we will celebrate all of this by recounting the story of Nicodemus. A story that is probably familiar to most, and a story most of us probably ignore thinking that we know it and the man Nicodemus. However, I believe Nicodemus has much to teach us yet. In fact for those of us who think we have seen it all and are happy in our settled ways, Nicodemus comes to us to convince us that old dogs not only can learn new tricks, but that some of us old dogs need to learn new tricks. God is never done with us, so don’t get comfortable – a thought that has been in the forefront of my thinking these last few of months as I contemplate retirement.

 Listen to how our Scripture passage starts: “Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews (some translations say that he was a “ruler” of the Jews). He came to Jesus by night.”

 That was an astonishing thing for Nicodemus to do. It was amazing because of who he was. He wasn’t just some Pharisee. He wasn’t just some Jew. He was a leader, a ruler. He was a man of position, and the one whom he sought for council was a man who had no position. Nicodemus was a man of letters. He was a scholar. Jesus, as far as we know, had no formal education. Nicodemus was a man who went far in life. He was probably old in honor and in years. And he came to this one who was probably young enough to be his son.

 And yet, in the stealth of the night, he sought out Jesus for counsel. What kind of a person does that make Nicodemus? First, I think it indicates that Nicodemus was a man with an open mind – in spite of his age, or maybe because of his age – in spite of his learning, or maybe because of his education, he was a man who was still willing to learn. He was a man who would not let prejudice blind him to the truth. All of his colleagues and compatriots condemned Jesus without having heard him, without sitting down and talking with him. They all decided that they did not care to believe what Jesus was teaching, or entertain the idea of what some were saying that he might be the Messiah. They didn’t want to believe it; they refused to believe it, and refused to put themselves in a position where their mind could be changed.

 There was a gathering of like-minded clergy in our conference called Impact. I don’t know if they still get together or not, but one of their goals was to make sure that United Methodist Churches and pastors in our conference toed the line and would not be welcoming and inclusive to and with LGBTQ people. So back when this church was working to be inclusive, my name was brought up at that conference without great honor. They worked to have charges brought against me.

 However, there was one colleague for whom I will ever be grateful, Ray McGee, who simply asked, “Has anyone talked with Doug?” Of course, no one had or wanted to. But he did. And so he called me. We had a delightful conversation and exchange of ideas, and we probably both hoped that we moved the other a bit. But he taught me through his actions, that you don’t have to end up agreeing with each other in order to be honest, respectful and truthful, and stay in fellowship with one another.

 It is easy to close our minds to the truth that we do not care to accept. It is so easy to shut our eyes to that which we do not wish to see. It is so easy to cover our ears to a message that we do not want to hear. And it is just as dangerous as it is easy.

 We are all prejudiced. Let’s not kid ourselves. But instead of letting our prejudice blind us, suppose we be fair enough and candid enough to come as Nicodemus did to Jesus who said “Before I condemn him at least I will hear what he has to say. I will meet him face to face. I will know what he claims and what he teaches.” Nicodemus comes with an open mind.

 He also comes as one who is earnest. Earnest is a funny word; one which I think has been colored for me because of those silly Ernest movies – Ernest Goes to Africa, Ernest Saves Christmas, Ernest in the Army. Have you ever seen any of those? I don’t think I have ever watched a full one. Ernest, in those movies, is anything but, which I think is the point.

 Earnest can have an old, stodginess related to it. Someone who is grumpy and so serious, that they have a hard time having fun. That is not what I mean by earnest. There is seriousness to being earnest, but it is serious about being purposeful. Purposeful about being the best that God created you to be, and finding meaning in this journey of life. I am here to tell you that it doesn’t have to be gloomy and grim. Being earnest can come with laughter and lightness. In the end, it is about being intentional and about growing in the love of God.

 So Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a will to learn - an open mind. He comes to Jesus in earnestness – and open heart. And he comes to Jesus as a man of courage.

 Now that isn’t what we normally think of when we think of Nicodemus. What do you mean he was a man of courage? Here was someone who was unwilling to come to Jesus in the light of day. He snuck around at night so no one would see him. That doesn’t sound very courageous. Well, that is true. I agree that coming in the night shows that he was a bit timid. I think Nicodemus was afraid. I think every footstep that he heard that night startled him. He probably panicked a bit every time he passed someone for fear of being recognized. Was he afraid? Yes, I think he was. And yet he came. Do not forget that. And that is a type of courage in and of itself. Is it more courageous not to be afraid? Or to be afraid and move through it anyway?

 So Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a will to learn - an open mind. He comes to Jesus in earnestness – and open heart. And he comes to Jesus as a man of courage – opened to be led by the Spirit in spite of his fears.

 Since he was a ruler, he probably had knowledge of where “interested” persons of the realm might be camping out and holding up. Nicodemus knows where to find Jesus. There comes the moment when Nicodemus and Jesus come face to face. I have to imagine it was a bit awkward at first. Nicodemus then begins, perhaps by trying to level the relationship by calling Jesus teacher, acknowledging his words and deeds. Jesus responds in kind by saying, “No one can see this unless they are born from above.” Nicodemus, of course, misunderstands. Instead of acknowledging that Jesus may have been paying him a compliment, he gets fixated on the impossibility of Jesus literal words. “What you talking about, Jesus?”

 Nicodemus responds with the words that have caught my attention of late. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can a person jump back into their mother’s womb?” I can see Jesus rolling his eyes saying, “When are these people going to quit being so darn literal?” We’re talking about things of the Spirit Nicodemus. The Spirit blows where it wills. You don’t know from where it comes and you don’t know where it goes, but when it grabs hold of you, it can make you a new person. Like a baby all over again, growing in Spirit, not just flesh. And it can happen at any moment – when you’re young, when you’re old like you Nic, or anywhere in between.

 The interesting thing is that it’s not just non-religious people who need to experience the movement of God’s love in the Spirit. As often as not it is us religious folks that need the renewing wisp of the Spirit’s wind. That’s the whole point of Nicodemus’ story. He was a man who knew Scripture perhaps better than anyone. He was one who probably practiced his religion to the letter of the law. And yet there was something still missing.

 Do you know anyone else like that? If you were to say Doug Paterson, you would not be wrong, but I am thinking of someone more famous that you should know. Another man who was a scholar, enthusiastic and brave. He became a missionary to America with a mind to convert the Indians. He goes back to England a complete failure. He has all this understanding of God and Scripture, but something was missing. One night he experiences God in a new way. For the first time he trusted that God loved him wholly for who he was. Not for his piety, not for his scholarship, not for his work, but simply because he was a child of God, whose name happened to be John Wesley. His heart was strangely warmed that night at Aldersgate, which changed the course of history.

 So what does happen when the spirit grabs hold of you? The Bible is full of all sorts of things that happen with the spirit’s movement. But the first and most important thing, the thing that this passage eventually leads to is to convince you and to convince me that we are loved. That we are accepted. God wishes to dote over each one of us. No matter our station in life, the work we do or the education we have, you are welcomed and accepted into God’s realm of love and care.

 A couple of weeks ago Naki was leading our staff worship and asked us to consider how we experience the presence of God. Her suggestion was four-fold: Be accepted; be aware; be active; be alert.

 It was then that I realized how important it is that we allow the Spirit to overwhelm us with the understanding that we are accepted by God - not when we become good enough; not when we have a certain theological understanding of God; but simply because we were born into this world. Some people catch on to that pretty quick, some of us are long in the teeth before that revelation creates in us what feels like new life.

 Here’s what that new life feels like. You know that person you don’t like. It dawns on you that they are loved and accepted by God as well. And you know what? You probably still won’t like them, but you will know that God loves them as God loves you. You will begin to think of them differently and treat them differently, and you will begin to experience what the kingdom of God that Jesus preaches might be like.

 The reason Nicodemus sought out Jesus is that even with all that knowledge and all that religiosity, there was still something missing – the assurance that God loved him and accepted him. He met Jesus and it was like his old heart was given new life.

 I pray the same will be true for you and me. Amen.