

Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2009

by the Rev. Mark Preece

Be quiet for a moment. Just breathe and listen. Pay attention to your senses.

What did you hear? Your breathing? Your heart beating? Your stomach rumbling?
Your neighbor's stomach?

Our Christian ancestors did this a lot. There was no television, no radio, no internet; no lawn mowers or cars or buses. It was a very quiet place. And when they listened, what they heard was the Spirit of God, praying in them. And not just the spirit of God in the sense that "God is everywhere" or that "we are created in God's image". No, they sensed something inside that was not them. An active presence, a voice, even. The Spirit of Jesus, praying in them.

I like to think of St. Paul, who spent much of his life on the road, travelling from city to city. He was often alone, or with a small group of companions. He had a lot of time to listen. And what he came to realize was this: "it is not I who live, it is Christ who lives in me."

Imagine being the first person to say that! I mean, I can read it in the Bible and adopt it as a sort of spiritual goal, but Paul must have intended it as an actual description of what it felt like to be Paul. If you want me to say the most important thing about who I am, says Paul, what I have to tell you is this: "it is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me." The most important thing about me is not me, says Paul, but something that is in me but not of me.

In this morning's Gospel, Nicodemus comes to see Jesus. He's a religious leader, and he comes at night, perhaps afraid for his reputation, coming to see this crazy prophet. And he says, "We know you are from God because no one can do the things you do unless they are from God." And Jesus says, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he's been born from above."

Now, there are two ways we can hear this whole exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus. Some people hear it as Jesus slapping Nicodemus away – he says, "don't flatter me; come back when you're ready to commit to something. I don't need your lukewarm platitudes." Many people hear this section of John that way.

But that's not the way I hear it. I think Jesus is saying, "Yes – in recognizing the hand of God in what I do, you have caught a glimpse of the kingdom of God. That means you must be born from above."

The Gospel is full of people who see Jesus perform astounding miracles and nevertheless fail to see that he's from God. In fact, one of the basic story lines in the Gospel is that Jesus says something or does something and some people follow him and others are offended by him or angry at him and leave. This is how they reveal

themselves as children of flesh or children of the Spirit; born from above or not. Jesus nets it out right after this morning's passage. He says, "This is judgment, that the light has come into the world, and some people prefer the darkness."

Nicodemus doesn't prefer the darkness, he comes in from the dark. And he's heard and seen Jesus, and he's drawn to him rather than repelled. So Jesus says, "pay attention to this! It tells you something important about who you are. Whatever you think you believe, whatever you say you believe, the truth is, you're born from above. Now, what does that mean for the way you live your life?"

Now, of course, this conversation does get pretty confusing for Nicodemus by the end. It's pretty confusing for us, too. But that just shows he's on a journey and he has a ways to go. So are we and we have a ways to go, too. It's a journey to understand who we are, and to come to live out that identity.

In the ancient world, where you were from and who you were born to pretty much defined your life. There wasn't a lot of social mobility. Like us, Nicodemus had spent a lifetime trying to figure out who he was, and to make an identity. Nicodemus was a Jew, a ruler of the people. He knew his role and what was expected of him. And now Jesus tells him that the most important thing he needs to know about who he is and where he's from is that he's a child of the Spirit, born from above.

There's good news in this, for Nicodemus and for us. I sometimes think that the great issue for modern Christians isn't that we don't believe, but that we don't believe we believe. In our heart of hearts we wonder whether we believe any of this stuff. If you woke me up in the middle of the night and asked me what I believe, what would I say? We wonder if we're not here under false pretenses.

But we're here. Like Nicodemus, we've come out of whatever darkness there is in our lives, at least for a little while, to hear what Jesus has to say. We may be muddled and uncommitted, but we showed up. And I think John would say that we've revealed something about ourselves by that choice.

Nicodemus is one of the only characters in the Gospel of John who isn't a disciple but shows up throughout the whole story. He's here in the third chapter in this morning's reading. He's back in the 7th chapter, when the governing council is about to arrest Jesus and Nicodemus says "let's hear him out, first." And he's back in the 19th chapter, when he brings spices worth a fortune to embalm Jesus' body before Easter. There's no suggestion that he ever becomes an official disciple, but he's clearly following along on the edges, keeping close. Drawn like a moth to a flame.

St. Paul said, "it is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me." John remembers Jesus saying, "you are born from above." I think they're both groping for words to say the same thing. Our deepest, truest identity lies not in ourselves but in God, God actually acting in us right now. And our most important journey is to live into that identity.

This morning we're baptizing three new fellow pilgrims on the journey with us. We'll tell them that they are born from above, and that our fondest hope for them is that they will remember that that's the most important thing they can know about themselves.

We'll encourage them to take themselves seriously as children of God, and to let that define the way they see themselves and the way they see others.

And we'll promise that we'll see them that way too. We'll take them seriously, and help them find their place in the Body of Christ. And that when they make a mess of things, as we all do from time to time, when they disappoint themselves and us, we'll remember who they really are and welcome them back.

From this morning on, if we want to say who Isabella, Hunter, and Ridley are, what's the most important thing we can say about them? That they've been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. Christ lives in them. That's who they are.