

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

Based on John 3:1-17

Father, Son, and now, Spirit. The stage was set. The heritage and rituals of the Jewish tradition, and the stories of God as Father, His power and supremacy, were steeped deeply into the hearts of the disciples. They had walked with Jesus, touched Him with their very hands. They knew the truth of God as Son. And while gathered together, the breath of the Spirit had entered their hearts, and stirred within them, the enthusiasm and creativity and courage to take the teachings and ministry of Jesus to the next level.

The church, as we have come to understand it today, was poised and ready for launch. The remaining disciples would become the next generation of leaders. They would take this show on the road. They would head out in different directions, and use the connections they had with family, friends, or former supporters to help establish themselves around the country, a biblical version of the gospel tent revivals of pioneer days in North America.

But who would be the disciples of the disciples? The quiet believers: individuals and families whose names have been lost in the sands of time. People who watched

thoughtfully while Jesus preached, their hearts moved by His message of hope and personal faith; people who looked on in great fear and trepidation while the Romans and Pharisees and Sadducees each took turns toying with our Saviour, like a political cat and mouse game, before they crucified Him; people who were afraid to speak, for there was too much to lose, should they find their voice.

But believe they did. And just as the disciples grieved over the loss of Jesus in those events at Calvary, so did these quiet believers, behind locked doors of their homes, and in hushed conversations with only trusted friends. They, like the disciples themselves, were poised and ready to hear more of the Good News. They watched, and they waited.

But there was one voice, who was courageous enough to speak out. Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a man of some importance, some pull in the church, well connected with local authorities. He was a man who could make things happen. Being an educated man, he was curious about some of Jesus' thinking. But he was not curious enough to risk tainting his reputation or standing in the community. So he arranged to meet Jesus privately, under cover of darkness; a scenario which could easily be denied come

the first wisps of morning light. Nicodemus recited the law, and the traditions of the faith. Jesus replied with a message of the Spirit.

"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. (v5-6)

"The things of this world are just that," Jesus said. "Even our rituals of faith have been created by humankind. The breath of the Spirit is what changes the heart. And without a heart filled with God, you have nothing!"
"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. (v9)

"That's exactly my point," Jesus continued. You are a man of the law and a man of the church. You follow your rules, but you do not give space or time to the Spirit of those rules, or the message they share. God did not send me here to make more rules, or to break the rules, but to show the world another way."

Nicodemus went away perplexed, but his curiosity lingered. The Spirit moved upon his heart, as it did with the disciples that day at Pentecost, and when the events of Calvary unfolded, it was Nicodemus in the backroom, playing the politics of trying to get Jesus released. He failed. But his new-found

faith did not. It was Nicodemus who helped to release Jesus' body from the cross; Nicodemus who was willing to risk his career and his position in society for the Saviour; Nicodemus who would become, a disciple for the disciples.

It is a compelling story. But here's the part we missed. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a high-ranking politician. And, Nicodemus was a Sadducee, respected by the Sanhedrin, the highest court of Jewish priests. And aside from the Romans, who were most concerned about having Jesus removed? The Pharisees and the Sadducees. Nicodemus was both. He was the enemy. Yet, his heart was moved, and in time, he became an early advocate for the faith.

Here is the challenging news of this story.

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” (v8)

The Holy Spirit blows where it wishes, as directed only by God. Where it lands or does not land, is not within our understanding. Which means that the Spirit of our Saviour does not just fall on us good church-going folk here. The Holy Spirit does not just fall on the 'good' people of this world (whatever that means) or the people that live on the 'right-side-of-the-tracks', the 'nice' people, or the people we 'like.'

This means that the Spirit may very well fall upon the heart of the nosy neighbor up

on the third floor of your apartment building, the teenager who egged your house last Hallowe'en, or the grumpy relative who always has to spoil family events with their caustic comments. The ways of this world, are not the ways of the Spirit, and we do not know how the Spirit may come to touch the heart of another, even the difficult people of this world.

Are you ready to be surprised by what the Spirit may have in store for you? Are we as a church, prepared to welcome everyone through our doors, knowing that Spirit may come to rest on a weary heart through worship, because of our welcome or our friendship? "Can this really be?" you ask. Yes.

"For God so loved the world..."
(v13)