## John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Nicodemus is a careful man. He is a leader of the Jews, educated with a place of responsibility and respect in the church. He thinks things through before he says or does them, for he knows the consequences of his teachings and his actions. Nicodemus is also curious. He has heard the buzz about Jesus, this man who turned water into wine and tables upside down in the temple. Nicodemus wants to know more but he has much to lose – security, position and power – if he is public about his curiosity. So he comes up with a plan, a way to seek out Jesus under the cover of darkness. Nicodemus will sneak into where Jesus is staying, maybe catch him off-guard, ask him a few questions, then go back home while it's still dark. No one will see him so Nicodemus can go home, curiosity satisfied, and get on with his life. It's a good plan – respectful and cautious. Nicodemus approaches Jesus for a bit of polite theological discourse. “Rabbi, we know you must have some sort of connection to God. Could you explain that to me? But do it in a way that I can understand and doesn't challenge me.” Nicodemus wants Jesus Lite, not Jesus the Light of the World. He thinks he is in control – of the encounter, of the conversation, of the rest of his life.

Nicodemus thinks he has come to Jesus. But then he hears Jesus speak about being born from above, born of water and Spirit. This flesh and blood man, standing so close that Nicodemus can feel his breath on him, speaks of earthly things, birth and water and wind. Yet, there is more to Jesus' words: God and Spirit and new life. “How can this be?” a bewildered Nicodemus asks. But it's too late. He has lost control. Nicodemus thought he was the one who came to Jesus, only to discover, in the words of Thomas Long, “that in the cosmic scheme of things, Jesus [has come] to him and to all humanity. Jesus [comes] in the flesh, sent by God – not to condemn, and certainly not to engage in polite theological discourse, but to save.”

Jesus, fueled by the Spirit, is sent into the world by God because God loves the world, this wonderful and terrible world. This world tries hard to look respectable on the surface but scratch that surface and you see it all – hate, rebellion, violence, corruption and sin. God loves this world that doesn't know how to love God, that sometimes willfully hates God. Yet God does not turn God's back on us. God comes near to us to save us. In this is all the mystery, all the redemption, all the power, all the hope in the universe. In this is the one who has all control over us and our lives. If we are to be honest, that can terrify us.

Like Nicodemus, we often delude ourselves into thinking we can come to Jesus how and when we wish. We come to church on Sunday, when we can. We read the Bible, if we have time. We pray, over meals, when we're scared or someone we love is in trouble. We fit Jesus into our busy lives, happy that he is there when we need him, content in our part-time relationship with him. And how does Jesus respond? He loves us, fiercely, with a love that is anything but part-time. Jesus loves us in a way that calls for our whole hearts and our whole lives. Jesus loves us in a way that demands not just our nighttime curiosity but also our devotion in the light of day.

I once presided at the baptism of a young girl and her younger brother. She was maybe four or five and her brother two or three. When it was time for the family to come to the font, Mom and Dad and the little girl came forward. The little boy started to but hung back a bit. The parents seemed embarrassed and worried but I decided to start the baptismal service, hoping that the boy would join us. I said what I had to say, the parents and the congregation did their parts, then I baptized the girl. Then it was the boy's turn, but he wasn't there. Frantically, Dad looked around for him. He went up and down the aisle, softly calling his son's name. The congregation searched too, from their pews, but none of us could figure out where the little boy had gone. Then we spotted him, lying on the carpet under a pew. Dad tried to coax him, but he wouldn't budge. I briefly thought of picking up the bowl of water, walking back to the pew and doing the baptism right there, but I was worried I would have to chase the toddler around the sanctuary, maybe even throw the water on him to complete the act. That idea had disaster written all over it. I don't know what he said to the little boy, but Dad got him out from under the pew, held tightly to his hand and brought him to the font. We baptized the child, not exactly against his will, but close.

I have thought about that day often, about the reluctant little boy and his baptism. Was his response to the invitation to the font an appropriate one? In the light of day, before a roomful of people, this child was being claimed by God's love forever, but he wasn't having it. Maybe things would have gone better in the familiarity of his own home, after he had gotten up from a nap or had finished playing. Or maybe it would have made more sense when he was older, when he could grasp the significance of what was happening. But that's not how God's love works. God's love comes to us, sometimes when we're not ready or it's not convenient. Sometimes the Spirit has to grasp us firmly by the hand when we try to run away from God because we are afraid to receive what God has to give. We mistake God's presence with us for punishment, for we know we deserve that more than unconditional love.

We don't know what to do with pure undeserved love, with a love that pursues us like cold water splashing upon our heads. We prefer a relationship with God on our terms: our own form of polite theological discourse. But God sends salvation. Salvation in the flesh. Salvation in the form of a man who loves us, who gives his life for us, who shows us how to love. Salvation that calls us into relationship with the one who created it, the one who embodies it and the one who brings its power into the world and makes us part of it. Part of love that unites instead of dividing. Love that extends a hand instead of pointing a finger. Love that demands we share it not just with those who are like us but with those who are different. Love that speaks of reconciliation and not condemnation. Love that lifts up others instead of pushing them down. Love that celebrates the diversity of God's creation instead of being frightened of it.

That kind of love is all-encompassing. It takes away any illusion of control we ever thought we had. It demands things of us. It makes us want to hide sometimes under the pew instead of facing the font and remembering the water that has made us Christ's forever. That kind of love pulls us toward the light, the word made flesh. It welcomes us into the embrace of the Savior who comes not to condemn us but to save us. How can this be? It's too late to ask the question. You and I are in it for the long haul. Love is and love will always be. Love is relationship – Father, Son and Spirit lived out in our relationships with one another. Love is all the relationships that are yet to be. Love is saving you and me and it is saving the world – in the dark of night and in the clear light of day.

Amen.

*Holy Trinity B*

*May 27, 2018*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

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