

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
March 5, 2023 – The Second Sunday of Lent
Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17
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Before we turn to today's lesson from the Gospel of John, I want to say something about the passage we heard from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans. This passage is one of the sources of the saying "justification by faith." Like many religious sayings, it is a kind of shorthand for some complex ideas. We can understand it better, perhaps, if we use another translation for faith – "trust" – to help us with its meaning.

Faith understood as trust means a personal relationship, a link between two persons, and an inward orientation of one person towards the other. If I trust you, I am saying something important about my view of your character. And if I trust the supremely good being – God – I am taking the first steps in making that goodness my guide to life. Aligning myself to God is the core of "righteousness." Faith is not simply a verbal formula of mental ideas. It is the beginning of a commitment to a Person and that Person's values.

According to the reading from Romans, Abraham trusted God and God regarded his faith or trust as righteousness – "justification by faith." "Justification" means "being treated as if I am righteous." In a sense, justification is an example of treating someone as a better person than they might be right now, in the expectation that they will grow into being that better person. In the Anglican tradition, this is what we mean when we say that we are called to "sanctification," our lifelong task. We trust that God's love for us will help us to become the persons we are meant to be. In the words of the Eucharistic prayer, Jesus "sent the Holy Spirit ... to bring to fulfillment the sanctification of all."

Today's lesson from the Gospel of John – the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus – is famous for their discussion of being "born again." Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, a man of faith in God. He had recognized that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God by the "signs" that Jesus did. In John's Gospel the word "signs" refers to the miracles of Jesus, such as healing the sick, feeding the five thousand, and raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. Because Nicodemus believed that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God, he wanted to know more about him. Nicodemus was checking Jesus out, not making an open commitment to follow him, so he "came to Jesus by night," that is, secretly.

Nicodemus opens the conversation by saying that he recognizes Jesus as a teacher who has come from God because he has seen the miracles Jesus has done. Yes, he has seen the "signs," but as for what is more important than the signs, Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

The exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus now hinges on the interpretation of a word with double meaning. The word can mean "from above" or "again." A good analogy in English is our phrase "from the top." This can mean "from a height," as in "a view from the top." Or it can mean "from the beginning," as in "take it from the top." Nicodemus interprets Jesus as saying "again," as in "take it from the top," and he asks the famous questions, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus did not mean “again” in this sense. He meant “from above,” or from heaven above, from the Spirit of God. This is the rebirth that is both possible and truly important. It is also difficult to understand. Jesus teaches that the Spirit of God is like the wind – it “blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” We cannot grasp the Spirit. We cannot comprehend its movements. But we can see its effects, and it can change our lives.

For Christians being “born again” means to undergo a spiritual rebirth. Evangelical Protestants speak of having an experience of “conversion,” often at a particular moment in time. This “conversion” is a spiritual event that changes a person’s life. Other people may see the “signs” of conversion in a person’s life when the person’s life is changed to be more in line with God’s vision of life.

What about Nicodemus? Were there signs that he had been “born again” of the Spirit? We don’t know much about Nicodemus from the gospel accounts, but we do know that after Jesus was crucified Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepared Jesus’ body for burial. Nicodemus brought 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes to wrap Jesus in linen cloths for burial – an extravagant gift that may have shown Nicodemus’ great respect for Jesus (John 19:38-42). We may regard this gift as a “sign” of the Spirit’s work because we know from scripture that generosity toward God and God’s people is rightfully regarded as being in line with God’s will.

When I was in my 20’s, I worked for 3 years as a clerk at a public library. This was also the time when I was re-discovering the church, re-committing myself to Christ. I was ardent and, you might say, idealistic. There was a middle-aged librarian who worked at the information desk which was situated near the circulation desk where I worked. This woman was unpleasant, critical, intolerant of mistakes and “stupid questions.” All day long we heard her judgmental criticism of one person after another. People who worked at the library avoided her when that was possible. This woman was also a devoted Roman Catholic who attended Mass every day before she arrived at work. I just couldn’t understand how someone who was such a faithful Christian could be such an obnoxious person! (I told you I was idealistic...) Then a wise person said to me, “Imagine what she would be like if she didn’t attend daily Mass.”

I tell this story as a warning to those of us – myself included – who tend to judge others harshly on the basis of the “signs” we see in their outward behavior. We must be a bit humble here. Certainly, some behaviors are more in alignment with the will and the goodness of God than others. We don’t let go of that truth. But we do not know how God is working with another person or how that person is either cooperating with or opposing God’s work. That is why only God is in the position to judge. We only truly know our own inner struggles, and they might very well teach us to judge others less harshly, or not at all.

During this season of Lent, may we commit ourselves to cooperating with God so that the signs of our faith may be a faithful witness to the work of God’s Spirit. In Jesus’ name. Amen.