

Sermon: Sunday, March 5, 2023 – Lent 3. John 3: 1-17
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church – Rev Greg Wooley

Today's message begins with an extended time of personal confession and joyous resolution.

It was fourteen years ago, late January or early February, and I had a big question to ask of God: "God, are you done with me?"

That's not as dire a question as it may sound, I wasn't at a low ebb emotionally or personally ...but spiritually? That was another matter. I'd been out of full-time ministry for ten years, and my soul was dying a slow death at the United Church congregation I was dutifully attending Sunday after Sunday. I had no idea whether I was just being too choosy and needed to suck it up, because this was *the way it was going to be* from here on, or if God had *something else* for me, something to jolt my spiritual self back to life. And so the question: "God, are you done with me?"

The answer from God, was this: "Get out there and find out."

So off I went: one week worshipping at a Pentecostal Church, the next week Anglican, the next week Mennonite Brethren, the next week Roman Catholic, then Alliance and Presbyterian and Lutheran and Christian Reformed and Baptist. Oh, and other United Churches, too. I promised Shannon that I would report back any interesting findings, and off I went.

And how many weeks do you think it took me to learn that God was not, indeed, finished with me? (more than five weeks? Less than five weeks?) Yeah, it took one Sunday; no, not one Sunday, one song. The place was an Alliance Church within walking distance of our home in north Calgary, a mid-sized evangelical Church with worship band and the music, as Spinal Tap would say, "turned to eleven", loud enough that the bass literally thumped you in the chest, and the song was "Your Grace is enough" by Matt Maher
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpYtYYaTFGQ> .

The lyrics go like this:

*Great is Your faithfulness, O God. You wrestle with the sinner's heart
 You lead us by still waters and to mercy And nothing can keep us apart*

*So remember Your people, Remember Your children
 Remember Your promise, O God:
 Your grace is enough, Your grace is enough, Your grace is enough for me*

*Great is Your love and justice, God. You use the weak to lead the strong
 You lead us in the song of Your salvation And all Your people sing along*

*So remember Your people, Remember Your children
 Remember Your promise, O God:
 Your grace is enough, Your grace is enough, Your grace is enough for me.*

An Biblical, thoughtful, respectful sermon by Rev. Nelson Annan spoke to my heart and that big loud song – written TO God, not just ABOUT God, a song of reliance on God's magnificent grace– was what my poor sleepy heart needed. And it didn't end at that one Sunday or that one song. Week after week, God kept reaching out to me in different settings, preacher after preacher steering away from the judgmentalism I was braced for, landing instead on the grace of Jesus Christ which simply will not let us be judged and defeated. Some Churches felt like,

“this is really nice for the people gathered here, but I don’t think there’s much future to this” and some Churches felt like “this doesn’t speak to me, but I can sure see what people see in this” and you know what? By “coincidence” – that is, God’s holy instances – I heard that worship song “Your Grace is Enough” at least three more times in three other Churches in the first two months I was touring from Church to Church. God knew what I needed to hear.

After a year of touring around, I was enjoying my tour but knew it was time to settle down and choose one place to worship. That Alliance Church was one of the candidates, and so was a very nice Mennonite Brethren Church, but where I landed was Grace Baptist Church in NE Calgary, a large Church with a simple Mission: “Live like Jesus, love like Jesus.” I liked the music team, I liked how multicultural it was and how different cultural groups named their own way of being within the larger congregation, and I will be forever indebted to Rev Dr Harry Kelm, who week after week seemed to be heading towards works-righteousness (“do good and you’ll receive God’s favour”) in his sermon but every week, ended up at grace instead – almost as if Jesus was there, with grace, awaiting our arrival.

On this Sunday when we pause at the “Evangelical” place setting of the Theological Banquet, I can say without reserve that without God leading me to get out there and find what my Spirit needed– and without the loud music, and without Pastor Harry’s preaching, and without the willingness of Grace Baptist to welcome this United Church Minister onto a prayer team, there is no way that I would have been ready to return to United Church Ministry, certainly not in the middle of 2012 when there was such immediate need in Canmore. I needed God to push me out the door and once I got out the door, Christ Jesus himself welcomed me home.

In the Evangelical tradition I guess that’s my Testimony. Or one of them. But more than that, it’s a story that helps that encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus seem very contemporary.

I bet it was hard for Nicodemus to get out the door, too, and find what his soul was yearning for. He’d heard about this Jesus, but Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and beyond that, one of the Sanhedrin – the ruling council who, ironically, would three years later put Jesus on trial. His high powered friends wouldn’t approve of him going to see this unauthorized, iconoclastic young preacher who was causing a disturbance around the Sea of Galilee. And, whether Nicodemus thought of this side of the equation or not, chances are pretty good that this no-status group of women and men that Jesus had gathered as his first disciples wouldn’t approve, either. They were still a MOVEMENT, committed to shaking up the religious establishment, and Nicodemus was nothing if not “establishment.”

So what did Nicodemus do? He came to Jesus at night.

I can identify with this side of his story, too. For that year when I was travelling from Church to Church, I kind of kept my distance. I enjoyed the anonymity. Most of the Churches were big enough that you could kind of blend into the crowd and at first, that’s all I wanted to do. Hand in hand with Nicodemus, I wasn’t ready to declare my intentions; staying in the shadows was safe and good.

And in the presence of Jesus, both Nicodemus and I learned rather quickly, that the power of his love is so strong, so welcoming, so transformative amidst the self-doubts and self-judgments that travel in the soul of spiritually wounded ones. Let’s hear once more the exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus, imagining yourself in that position: coming to Jesus

with a lifetime of religious experience, tons of knowledge and respect, and a sense of longing, yearning for more...

“Nicodemus says: Teacher, some of us have been talking. You are obviously a teacher who has come from God. The signs You are doing are proof that God is with You.

“Jesus replies: ³ I tell you the truth: only someone who experiences birth for a second time can *hope* to see the kingdom of God.

“Nicodemus, taken aback, says: ⁴ *I am a grown man*. How can someone be born again when he is old *like me*? Am I to crawl back into my mother’s womb for a second birth? *That’s impossible!*

“And Jesus says: ⁵ I tell you the truth, if someone does not experience water and Spirit birth, there’s no chance he will make it into God’s kingdom. ⁶ *Like from like*. Whatever is born from flesh is flesh; whatever is born from Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Don’t be shocked by My words, *but I tell you the truth*. Even you, *an educated and respected man among your people*, must be reborn *by the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God*”.

Nicodemus, though challenged by these new modes of thought, hung in there with Jesus and they stayed engaged in conversation right up to those classic Christian words of John 3: 16 and 17...

“¹⁶ For God expressed God’s love for the world in this way: God gave God’s only Son so that whoever believes in Him will not face everlasting destruction, but will have everlasting life. ¹⁷ Here’s the point. God didn’t send God’s Son into the world to judge it; instead, He is here to rescue a world *headed toward certain destruction*”.

Yes, there is an exclusive claim made here about coming to Jesus and being reborn, and yes, that remains problematic for me because I cannot imagine that God would intentionally set up non-Christians for eternal failure. That’s just not who God is. But what I definitely hear in these words is Jesus’ pushing Nicodemus to make a decision: do you want life, or don’t you? Sounds like a ridiculous question on the surface, but not so ridiculous when you look around at the life-denying ways chosen again and again by humanity. As a species, us humans are experts at self-thwarting behaviours, we excel at looking at God’s ways of transformative, reconciled, life-giving community and heading 180 degrees away from that. So Jesus needs to ask, “do you actually *want* life, in the fullness I am promising”? If you DO want life, get ready for that “being reborn” stuff ‘cuz you might need to un-learn a lot of ways you’ve been living for a long time. And If you DO want life, the path isn’t secret or hidden; walking alongside Jesus will get you there, and God is so all-in on this that in Jesus, the power of death itself, has been conquered.

God so loved THE WORLD, says Jesus via the gospel of John. Not just religious folks. Not just humans. God, author of life, loved the world and loves the world, and reaches with love and grace into the lives of all people and in fact all living beings. Us humans can keep on being committed to ways of inequality, we can keep being addicted to our energy-gulping lifestyles, we can keep separating humanity into friend and foe... and God keeps reaching in. And for those out there this morning – here in the Church, watching the YouTube at home, reading the sermon afterward – I need to say something to you. If *you* are wondering if God is done with you in any way, the answer is NO. God is never done with you. God walked a human path in Jesus, a path that included death and resurrection, for the express purpose of

closing the gap, coming up close: experiencing the joy and anguish of life's best and worst, and God's time-tested love for you is without limit and without end.

Whether we timidly come to Jesus at night alongside Nicodemus, or turn to God in times of transition, or tearfully shout at the Divine and all things Sacred amidst crushing grief, the response is one of welcome, and empowerment, and life. In Christ, with Christ, we are always at home; in Christ, with Christ, we have the opportunity to reset, recalibrate, reorient, be reborn into new ways; in Christ, with Christ, we are invited to live a life that touches sacredness from its beginning to that place of life beyond life.

We are people of that evangel – those glad tidings – that good news. May the gracious, reconciling love of Jesus Christ bring you hope and life this day and every day. Amen.

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