

THEOLOGY MATTERS

E. Hornbeck

May 27, 2018

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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. John 3:1-17

SO: did you hear it? That rock-star verse: God SO loved the world. We've all heard it before. We've seen it on billboards, t-shirts, merchandising, and, famously, at sporting events. That tradition goes back to the 1980s and a self-styled evangelist who came to be known as the Rainbow Man. Remember this guy? He travelled to sporting events across the country with a rainbow wig, a John 3:16 sign, and a knack for getting his image on national television. Eventually, he traded the wig and sign for firearms and stink bombs, and all that landed him in the Mule Creek State prison in CA, where he is currently serving 3 life terms. The end of times were at hand, after all. A little parable suggesting that perhaps, just perhaps, theology—how we *talk about God*, theo-logos--may *actually* matter. How we understand God (or the absence of God), what we think love means, and how we think all that relates to us, shapes—which is to say, forms or deforms--how we understand ourselves, the world and our place in it. Jill Duffield the editor of the Presbyterian Outlook magazine writes, "It isn't enough to love Jesus. We have to be able to articulate what we believe is true about the Triune God because what we believe shapes how we behave. Theology matters." Or, as Richard Rohr likes to say, *we become what we behold*.

The popular fixation on John 3:16 is a case in point. It flows out of this whole theological framework based on a demanding and judging God, in charge of everything, and so angry about all our moral failings, that he (always he) threatens to punish us for all eternity, unless we get our thinking about Jesus just right. Faith is transactional, love is conditional, salvation is individual and fear is the power that drives it all. This is the theology of empire. It supports the whole hierarchical scheme: God at the top, then men over women, rich over poor, white people over black and brown ones, humans over nature, all enforced with violence if necessary. It is currently on full and hideous display. And the God at the top of that triangle—this moody and sometimes violent dude—looks a whole lot more like Zeus, the God of Greek mythology, than Yahweh, Breath of Life, Infinite Mystery, Fountain of Goodness.

You know, the God of the Hebrew scriptures, of the gospels, the God of Jesus. "The wind that blows where it will... you don't know where it comes from or where it goes." Just one part of

this whole theological exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus in today's reading. Nic is a religious leader, which in that context, would also have meant collaborator. So, he comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness (where power loves to do its thing) demanding an explanation for all the signs and wonders connected to this itinerant preacher. This takes place immediately after Jesus has openly confronted the temple authorities and challenged their oppressive practices, which fires up the people, and angers the powerful. Nic sees the power embodied in Jesus and is troubled by it. Jesus sees the power of Nic's position and is astonished at his blindness.

Are you not a teacher of Israel? And you don't get it? Its right here, the "kingdom of God" mysterious, creative Presence! You trust *that* and you're in it. all you need is, a little change of heart, you need to be born anew. And old Nic replies: born anew, what? climb back into my mother's womb? Do you hear that jab at literalism? It is also a pointed critique of power and the misuse of religion to oppress—all things that block the transformation of hearts and vision and systems, then and now.

Nicodemus--his name means literally "power over the people"-- has managed, in all his participation in oppressive systems, to locate himself outside of God's reign, that Spirit soaked reality that Jesus keeps saying is right here, right now. Its around us and within, accessible to all who are willing to wake up, to keep eyes and ears, hearts and minds open to receive it. He also makes clear, even Nic is invited to the party; its up to him to choose, to reconnect, to be born anew.

This is the whole meaning and function of healthy religion, by the way— from the Latin *re-ligare*, to re-connect--with deeper self, each other, with the holy. When religious systems get distorted, infected with fear, co-opted by power, diminished by narcissism—as they all do at various times—there is always a choice: abandon or reclaim. Jesus was all about reclaiming, renewing the deep religious tradition in which he was rooted; Paul sought to continue that work. It's a pattern we see stretching back into the Hebrew scriptures, and forward, through all of Christian history. Wisdom blows where she will, things get badly off track, and then somehow renewed, almost always through the work of misfits, mystics, and holy fools. We see this in the desert movement and rise of monasticism in fourth and fifth centuries, the flowering of mysticism in the 12th and 13th, and the reformation in the 16th to name just a few.

Many people believe that we are in such a time today; and on my better days, I agree. We may even be part of it. I think our refusal to abandon and desire to reclaim something of the deep and rich wisdom of *this* tradition is one of the things that unites us here at SPC—after all, abandonment is the far more popular choice these days. I see this reclaiming project as an important part of our shared commitment and work; it has been for a long time, and Spirit willing, will continue on. Its challenging and unsettling and inspiring. And, *it matters*. Bad theology supports hatred, discrimination and abusive power. Good theology saves lives. Thankfully, we're not alone in this, and have managed to engage some pretty fantastic theological conversation partners over the years—Marcus Borg, Richard Rohr, Ilia Delio, James Cone to name just a few.

I've been spending some time recently with a newer, younger voice, Roger Wolsey, a young Gen X pastor, theologian, and campus minister. In that challenging setting, Wolsey has been hard at work *reclaiming*, trying to articulate something about this new stream of Jesus-following that seems to be on the rise these days. He uses the term "progressive Christianity"-- a theological, not political reference. Wolsey didn't invent it, but he riffs on in some really interesting ways. I love his claim that progressive Christianity is inherently conservative, in that it seeks to explore and **conserve** deep tradition, which then often needs translation into 21st

century language and forms. His book is called “Kissing Fish” – the Jesus fish and the Darwin fish embracing in a provocative symbol of yet another new /old thing, faith and science in partnership.

So, Wolsey names **pluralism** as one of the key foundations of this contemporary Christian practice—because it is intentionally open to wisdom from a diversity of sources including science and all deep faith traditions. Other descriptors he names include: passionate, prophetic, prayerful, peaceful and pro-LGBTQ. My favorite for today, Trinity Sunday, is poetic, which *at the very least* means, reveling in symbols, multiple meanings and metaphors.

The bible, says Wolsey, is poetry. All theology is, in fact, poetry, by which he means, something with a capacity to reveal deep truth rather than some kind of mathematical proof. The trinity, he claims, is the most beautiful kind of poetry, the best kind of theology, because it is endlessly creating new possibilities.

We can hear whispers of this trinitarian poem throughout the scriptures, new and old, including the story before us today, where we have the Father and the Son and that mysterious wind that blows wherever it will. Christian theologians have been riffing on this poem from the start. My favorite version comes from Augustine, 4th century African bishop, who described the Triune One as Beloved, Lover and the Love that binds them together. Also in the fourth century (see what I mean about conserving?) theologians began talking about the trinity as a dance. They found this word “perichoresis” (hear choreography in there?) to describe this *cosmic dance of love at the very heart of reality*. Richard Rohr writes, “Trinitarian revelation says start with loving—and this is the new definition of being! There is now a hidden faithfulness at the heart of the universe.”

Contemporary theologian Bruce Sanguin describes Trinity like this: “each of the members... encircling the others in ecstatic dance, a whirling dervish spinning off new worlds born of their joyful play. To wrestle with the doctrine of the Trinity is to celebrate that the entire universe, including humans, emerges out of a relational matrix—a cosmic Trinitarian dance.”

This profound intuition that has been unfolding in our tradition for thousands of years is today being confirmed in every branch of science and form of empirical observation, from the microscope to the telescope. Physicists, biologists and contemplatives are all confirming that the foundational nature of reality is relational.

God is love, which is also to say, God is relationship, in fact, God is a community of love, unity in diversity creating infinite abundance. God creates in love, by love, for love, always seeking increasing connection and wholeness. We are made in that image, called to relationship, invited to co-create increasing wholeness and love, in whatever ways that shows up in our lives. We don't “choose welcome” because of who we are. We choose welcome because of who we know God is, a choosing that never ends. God so loves the *cosmos* (the actual Greek word in John 3:16) that God enters into it, every part of it, including us. We just have to keep finding ways to say yes, and join the dance.