

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Lent 2-A (8 March 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gen 12.1-4a, Psalm 121, Rom 4.1-5, 13-17, Jn 3.1-17

1 Beginning: Once upon a time...

When Becky and I were still newly married, we developed a plan with some friends to move to the Bronx in order to plant new churches. One of the reasons we chose the Bronx was because we knew that borough to be full of all kinds of people: an amazing diversity of nationalities, ethnicities, languages, cultures, all kinds of things. And we knew that, besides English, Spanish was one of the most commonly spoken languages there. So we spent two summers in a row traveling overseas to do the work of language acquisition.

It was while attending a one-month immersion program in a language school for missionaries in Costa Rica that I encountered an article by Catholic priest Henri Nouwen. In it, Nouwen described his own experiences of language learning as an adult. One of the clearest signs of maturing, growing up, for a human being is our capacity to speak and to express ourselves. So when I, as an adult, enter a context in which no one else speaks my language, suddenly I'm an infant. I can't read the signs, I can't understand instructions, I can't speak to make my needs known. Whatever I say sounds like "goo goo, gaa gaa." I'm reduced to making signs and hoping. It's a very humbling experience. It's very exhausting. And it can be emotionally devastating. Immersion and language learning are, among other things, a huge spiritual challenge. Because we're starting over, like little babies, and even the little five-year-old girl next door found our efforts hilarious!

In our Gospel reading, Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night. He's nervous about being seen with Jesus: he doesn't know what to make of Jesus yet. But he seems compelled to set aside his pride, his social status as one of the Sanhedrin, and to have a frank conversation with this untutored radical named Jesus.

Nicodemus knows there's something going on with Jesus, but Nicodemus doesn't even know what question he needs to be asking. So he comes to Jesus and he speaks what he understands so far.

Nicodemus says, “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 accepts his statement and then gives him what he needs to take the next step down the road. Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” or born again. It’s time to start over.

2 Middle: Tension: destabilizing

Jesus is challenging Nicodemus in two ways. First, he is talking about the “Kingdom of God.” This was a phrase that Jesus liked to use: it was his constant topic of teaching and preaching. It’s all he’s interested in. So whether Nicodemus is used to that particular turn of phrase or not, it’s the one their conversation is going to be based on. Jesus never really seems to define clearly what the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven is: he just talks about it a lot, often in parables or exhortations like this one.

So Jesus clarifies for Nicodemus, the Kingdom of Heaven is what you seek. But here’s the hard part. You aren’t there yet. You are, in fact a far way off, and radical change is the only way to get there. You must, says, Jesus, be born again to see the Kingdom of God.

What does it mean to be born again? Well, like in language learning, it’s going to be hard. It’s going to mean letting go of your competency and control, and depending upon the good will of others. It’s going to mean making lots and lots of mistakes and being willing to keep on trying anyhow.

Imagine how hard this was for Nicodemus! One of the most respected scholars and religious leaders of his time, Nicodemus was no slouch! He had dedicated his life to study and learning and knowing God. He had the kind of discipline and energy that very few people, then or now, have. He had pursued the Kingdom of God with all his heart. And, Jesus tells him, if you really want to get there, you need to start over. I can understand Nicodemus’ reluctance, his hesitation to embrace what Jesus is telling him. Jesus is demanding a tremendous sacrifice in Nicodemus’ own self-understanding. Let go of your status, let go of all your credentials: they are without value for the goal of inheriting God’s kingdom. Start over.

Sometimes, entering the Kingdom of God is hardest for those of us who have been most dutiful about pursuing it. We go to church. We say our prayers. We give of our income. We care for the poor. We love our neighbors. At least, we try to do all those things. And those are good things. But sometimes even the best things can interfere with our capacity to know God. Even the best things can become stumbling blocks, points of pride that we are reluctant to give up. Monuments that point to past accomplishments while blocking the path forward into deeper relationship with God.

But being born again means taking those pieces of life where you think you’ve arrived, you think you’ve gotten it all figured out, you think you’re done: and throwing them out in order to start again.

Because, here’s the deal: none of us has arrived yet. None of us has yet entered the “Kingdom of God.” We each and all stand in need of further grace, further guidance, further growth, further renewal. We each need to tear down the imperfect structures we’ve built and to be guided to erect new ones yet more complete by God’s spirit at work within us. Though they will be imperfect, too. It is the building, the process, that is the point.

3 End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...

The Christian life is not a destination. It is a process, a journey, a pilgrimage. I've said before that St. Thomas' is not a museum. No church can live faithfully into God's call for us today if we hold on too tightly to the past. So also no Christian can grow into a fuller, deeper walk with God unless she is ready to be born again, born from above, re-born, re-newed. To be challenged and invited to grow beyond where she's been so far.

Infants are fantastic learners. They're learning how to control their bodies, how to discern other people, how to talk: all sorts of things. It is only as we grow up that our thoughts and actions harden into set patterns and we lose our flexibility. Around middle-age, even the lenses in our eyes harden and we can no longer shift our focus so well, and we require readers.

But here's the great part: our souls are not limited like our brains and bodies. Exercise and nutrition can slow the process of aging bodies. Souls can do even better. Exercise and nutrition help: caring for others, going to church, saying your prayers: these are all important: they create the context and the opportunity for God to do God's work in you.

But have you ever been around a person who was so alive she brought joy to your heart? Someone wise and kind and calm and insightful? That's the renewal Jesus brings to willing hearts. And it's usually the "old souls" who seem to reflect God's work in them most clearly.

You're never too old to enter the Kingdom of God. If you're willing, if you're open and asking, Jesus can make your soul young and supple and vital. It will likely mean swallowing some pride and abandoning some privilege. It will mean learning new things and it definitely requires the capacity to be surprised. Because God's love is surprising beyond anything we might imagine on our own.

During this season of Lent, I invite you to embrace a renewal and a born-again nature that makes room in your life and in your heart to be surprised anew by God's love for you. I pray that you will encounter God in a surprising new way, that you will discover a new way of living in Christ, and that you will catch a startling new glimpse of your promised inheritance, the Kingdom of God.

Amen.