

John 3:1-17
March 8, 2020

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's been 30 years since I graduated from high school. I knew change was blowing in the wind like it or not. But I was ready for that change or at least I thought I was. Eager to leave the nest behind, spread my wings, and see all that life has to offer. Ready to meet new people, learn new things, and begin my quest for a new life. One in which I make the decisions. One in which I do what I want to do. One in which I set my own sails for new waters.

Yet, it didn't take all that long for me to decide I wasn't quite as ready for this change as I thought I was. I wanted this new life, but I still wanted the old life too. You know, those parts I so often took for granted like mom washing my clothes. Or dad changing the oil in my car or fixing a flat tire. Or the meals that were placed upon the table each evening with no effort on my part. Sure, I had my list of chores to do; however, this new life I was so ready to get on with and discover came with a lot more work than I had anticipated. There were growing pains such as drying a favorite cotton shirt on high heat and realizing it was now a hammy down the younger brother I didn't have. Or, the time I took the extra portion of my student loans – you know, that extra amount to buy books with or to live on – and bought an overpriced mountain bike that I just knew I needed. After a few weeks of riding that bike around and reality sitting in, I quickly learned that was not the best stewardship of those financial resources.

Change is difficult. It can be exciting and often rewarding; however, it can also be exhausting and painful to get to that end point where new life flourishes and we can finally see the fruit of our labors. Often, we deem it is just too challenging or too disrupting to our comfortability, so we do the obvious – we pull back the reins and slow things down and perhaps turn around and go back to where we've been. Yet, it is often a necessary means to get to the end we desire where long held dreams are finally achieved, such as attending and graduating from college, or landing the job we have always hoped for.

Change seems to be at the root of Jesus' answer to Nicodemus. I relate all too easily to Nicodemus because it usually takes me about 7 or 8 times reading and listening to Jesus' words until I can wrap my mind around what he is saying. Nicodemus recognizes something special in Jesus. Because of the miracles Jesus is doing Nicodemus senses Jesus is indeed one sent by God. He wants to learn more and so he comes to Jesus under the darkness of night. Now, it's been said he does this because he wants to do so in secret, so his colleagues don't see him. However, there may be another reason. Apparently, it was common in those days for the religious experts and interpreters of the law to read and study God's word in the darkness of the night when things are quiet and still. When distractions are minimalized. Thus, perhaps it wasn't so much that Nicodemus was worried about being spotted as it was, he was eager to learn and gain a deeper understanding of who Jesus truly is and to give his sole attention to this Rabbi or teacher.

The response he gets to his questions leaves him baffled. "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from above." What Nicodemus hears is not what Jesus speaks of. His interpretation is only what his human mind can comprehend, and it doesn't make sense. It's impossible for one to go back into the womb and be born again. Yet, that isn't what Jesus is getting at. What Jesus is getting at is change. In order to see things of God, one must let go of things that are holding them back from encountering and seeing the kingdom Jesus has come to usher in. One must incur change that can only come from the rebirth brought about by the Holy Spirit.

One must set their sights on Jesus and give their whole selves to Jesus. That is when transformation takes place. New life begins. God lenses begin to replace our lenses which have been shaped by the world's lenses. Then and only then, when our sights are on Jesus and we place our lives in his hands can we see who he truly is and what the cross he hung upon, the life he gave, and the grave he rose from truly mean for us and for the world. When we have finally let go of those things that distract us, get in our way of interpreting the Word of God made flesh, can we truly hear and comprehend the words that bring life and forever change us, "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."

Yet, to get to this point as Nicodemus and others Jesus encounters is not easy. It is painful. It is a process in which things do indeed need to be left behind. Sacrifices made. The way its always been brushed aside for the way of God. A willingness to let our minds be opened to a new way of life, a new way of seeing, and a new way of love.

I so desire to see the kingdom of God that Jesus sees. I so want the change in my life that he offers. As a pastor, at times I think there is something wrong with me when I don't see it. Yet, like we all do from time to time, I struggle to see it and experience it because I am not ready for the change Jesus calls us all to. I am not ready to let go of things I cling so desperately to. I am not ready for the discomfort of sacrificing some of those things I cherish for the sake of the kingdom.

I want to get to the promised land God leads God's people into but often want to do it on my terms and not God's. I want the freedom that comes from leaving the comfort and safety of the nest without the obstacles I will encounter, the struggles I will face, or the changes I will need to make in order to truly experience that freedom. I want to make my own choices, my own decision, set my sails for new waters and too often I forget that my ways are not God's ways. It's not my ship I am trying to steer, but rather it is God's and Jesus is one at the helm. He is the one who can calm the stormy waters.

Jesus offers us all of this. He offers us freedom from that which binds us. He offers us love that fills us like no other. He offers us life that is richer and fuller than any self-help book promises we can obtain. He offers us a new life. Born not of flesh and blood but rather born of the Holy Spirit and born of God. Born in the waters of baptism in which we are joined to Christ. It's there, and he freely offers and gives it; yet, are we willing to take hold of it? Are we willing to change our ways to fully see and live God's ways? Are we willing to let Jesus change us? Change our hearts. Change our minds. Change our life. He is the only one who can bring about the change we need that leads to new life.