

2nd Sunday in Lent, Year A
March 5, 2023
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson
John 3:1-17

A Beginner's Heart

In Zen Buddhism there is a concept called Shoshin or a “beginner’s mind.” A beginner’s mind is one that is open to new experiences, doesn’t carry preconceptions, and is eager to learn. A beginner’s mind counteracts the paradox that often occurs when the more one knows about a subject the more likely one is to be closed minded to new information or a new approach. Zen teacher, Shunryu Suzuki, who wrote the popular book, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, on the subject, says that “in the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few.”¹ This beginner’s mindset is one that has transcended the practice of Zen Buddhism and been applied to many other disciplines and fields – from martial arts to architecture and design, to medicine and science, to the business world. And it’s not difficult to see how adopting this way of thinking can foster creativity and innovation and lead to breakthroughs in solving difficult challenges.

In many ways our gospel text this morning requires us to approach it with a beginner’s mind. The 3rd chapter of John is among the most well-known and oft quoted to where even those who do not identify as being Christian are at least familiar with these words. And the familiarity of this passage can deceive us into thinking that we already know what it means. While these words do offer us a beautiful vision of God’s all encompassing love and plan of salvation for the whole world, this passages also carries with it much baggage. Let’s face it, instead of being the basis for an invitation to new life, the phrase “born again” is used to label and sort us into groups. “Are you born again? – good, you’re saved like us.” Or “Are you born again? – oh, you’re crazy like them.” And in this way the language from our passage is used to exclude and alienate people based on their beliefs. What is often emphasized in Jesus’ words

¹ Suzuki, Shunryū. *Zen mind, beginner's mind*. 1970.

about rebirth and salvation is not God's love and the universality of that love, but instead condemnation, judgement, and separation.

One way that we can approach this text with fresh eyes is to take a closer look at Nicodemus. Often Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus feels like simply a prelude to Jesus' discourse, but there is more going on here with Nicodemus to relegate him to the sidelines. Here are a couple of things that we know about him right off the bat. 1. He is a leader in the Jewish community, a Pharisee. 2. He comes to see Jesus at night. Perhaps he is afraid of the repercussions of seeking out the rabbi in a public place, especially after Jesus has just made a scene cleansing the temple in John's narrative. But in spite of Nicodemus' fears or misgivings, there is something about Jesus must have been compelling to him, piquing his curiosity and stirring something within him. Unlike some of the other religious leader Jesus encounters in the gospels, Nicodemus acknowledges right away that Jesus must be from God because he could not do the things that he does apart from God. His questions to Jesus seem to be genuine and not a set up to trap Jesus in a political and religious no win situation.

What Jesus does when Nicodemus approaches him is essentially ask him to assume a beginner's mind. To drop the pretense of his position and his pedigree in the house of Israel. Jesus says he must be reborn in a way that casts off his expertise, his study of the law and scripture and the traditions that have taught him what to expect from God. He must start fresh, with the Holy Spirit bringing him forth into new life, in order to truly see the kingdom of God and experience eternal life. And I think Nicodemus is trying to understand all this and to learn more and yet he still doesn't get it. Now Nicodemus will come back up a couple of more times in John's gospel. In chapter 7, Jesus is teaching in the Temple and because of his controversial teachings and swelling crowds and followers causing quite the stir, the Jewish leaders decide to send the temple guards after him to arrest him. Nicodemus, however, defends Jesus to his colleagues, demanding that Jesus be given a fair hearing for his alleged crimes. And then in the final chapters of John, Nicodemus reemerges once again. This time with a man named Joseph of Arimathea, who was known as the secret disciple. The two men use their positions of power and influence to be able to take Christ's body from the cross and bury him with dignity according to their customs.

While it is true that Nicodemus' first encounter with Jesus does not lead him to denounce his title and his power, leave everything and follow Jesus in that moment, it's clear that Nicodemus is not left unchanged from his encounter with Christ, something sparks in him that will continue to burn. There are many who are critical of Nicodemus, saying that he might have been compelled by Jesus' teachings, but lacked the courage to act openly on his convictions. In fact during the period of the reformation, John Calvin called those who sympathized with the movement, but were reluctant to join their cause publicly, Nicodemites. And these critiques are not completely without warrant, I want to give our guy Nicodemus a little bit of a break here. Because while most of us would like to think our journey of discipleship looks like the enthusiasm of the fishermen Peter, James, and John who immediately left their nets, their homes, and their lives to follow Jesus. I think if we're honest with ourselves our lives of faith may more closely that of Nicodemus.

Now here's what is so transformative about Jesus' words here in John. God's plan to save the world, the whole world, that includes Nicodemus and that includes us. Through Jesus Christ, and out of God's great love, God intends to save the world. God intends to bring life, everlasting life to the world. And it is God who is going to act upon this plan. It is God who saves. God who births us into new life. Perhaps a better question for Nicodemus to ask is not, "How can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" But "how can a person birth themselves?" Being born again is not something we can do for ourselves. It is a gift freely given to us.

Our response then to God's action in our lives is to believe. Believing, not solely in the sense of adopting and accepting some kind of essential tenants, but believing and putting our trust in God. A belief is not a noun but is a verb. This belief and this trust leads us to follow Christ so that our lives resemble what Jesus taught. We walk the way of Jesus Christ. And this way of Jesus Christ is eternal life. This leads us to not only adopt a beginner's mind - shedding all what we think we know,, but a beginner's heart. When we are born again of the Spirit, which by the way is not only one singular knock-you-on-your-butt-blind-you-kind of conversion event, but one that be can experienced anew every day, we are given a beginner's heart. A beginner's heart is one that is open to the Spirit's leading. A beginner's heart is one that is curious and

considers all of the ways God might be acting in one's own life and in the world. A beginner's heart is not judgmental of others' faith journeys, and does not presume to know the status of another's relationship with God. Birth is often a long and laborious process, so why would faith be any different? A beginner's heart does not narrowly define how God can save the world, but trusts that God knows what God is doing, and that God will get God's way in the end. A beginner's heart leaves us open and vulnerable to experience God's grace and mercies everyday, so that everyday we may be living in the light of eternal life in Christ.