“Shift”

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Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

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***Romans 8:12-17***

***So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” It is that very Spirit bearing wisdom with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.***

***John 3:1-17***

***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. 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.”***

Today is the Sunday that the Church has come to call Trinity Sunday. Christians tell the story of God through the Old Testament. We tell the story of Jesus, and Jesus’ relationship to God in the New Testament. Last Sunday we celebrated the sending of the Holy Spirit, so today begins the time in the church calendar when we spend time relating all three parts of the Trinity, God, Jesus and the Spirit.

Both of the scripture texts for today are examples of the early Church trying to describe and understand the meaning and relevance of this new relationship to God and Jesus.

First, the scripture text from the gospel of John tells us of Nicodemus, one of the leaders of the Jews, who comes to Jesus at night. At night, because it would have been suspicious for a Pharisee, a leading Jewish leader, to be seen conversing with Jesus. I like to imagine what Nicodemus was going through at that time. We don’t know how old Nicodemus is or how long he has been a Jewish leader, but we can surmise that he was an established figure. Have you ever felt like that? You have your job, your family, your place in life feels solid, you are sure of expectations and obligations, and have been through enough roughness in life to feel sure that you can meet most of the future with some confidence. I’m doing ok today.

Then along comes something. In the case of Nicodemus, it was Jesus who came along. Maybe there were rumors of this new prophet Jesus; of the things he was saying, of the things he was doing; how he was upsetting some of the establishment. Maybe Nicodemus even saw Jesus around. Something must have stirred inside Nicodemus that kept him curious about Jesus. Something must have stirred, enough for Nicodemus to refer to Jesus as Rabbi, and to be able to believe that “no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” What did it take for Nicodemus to get up the courage to finally say to himself, “Tonight. Tonight is the night. I’m going to go talk to Jesus.”

Yes, the scripture goes on after this, but I want to freeze frame right here with Nicodemus. Because without that *something that came along to shift the established view* of life that Nicodemus had, we wouldn’t be reading this story. That’s the first important part of this text. The shift.

The second important part of this text is the questions Nicodemus asks: clarifying questions about confusing information, and most importantly, “How can these things be?”

It’s one thing to not believe something, but it’s another to take the next step and stay in the conversation. Jesus says these confusing words, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus could have decided right then and there that this night time visit wasn’t such a good idea, and that this guy Jesus just talks nonsense. But he stayed in the conversation – he asked what you or I might have asked – “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus’ answer was no less confusing, but much more enticing. Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and 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.”

This was a common teaching style then. Not quite question and answer but more like statement and question style. Jesus makes statements that will elicit a question. When Nicodemus then asks, “How can these things be?” he began a conversation that has stayed with us as one of the most important parts of our faith story – and evidently an important part of Nicodemus’ faith story as well, because we learn later in the gospel of John, that Nicodemus was one of the men who came along with Joseph of Arimathea to remove the body of Jesus from the cross and prepare him for burial.

Nicodemus, an established leader of the Jews is moved to risk his own standing in society by stepping outside his norm, and seeking out Jesus. Seeking out more information about this person Jesus, who is causing some heads to turn. By doing this Nicodemus has begun to shift his perspective and peak his curiosity enough to engage and remain engaged with the new world Jesus has begun to show him. This is our task also.

Putting ourselves in a position to see the kingdom of God, to participate in the coming of the kingdom of God, starts with wondering if that little bit of unrest we experience in the back of our mind is leading us somewhere.

In the travels of the apostle Paul, he ran into people with the same questions as Nicodemus. Our faith has spread because of the kinds of questions people ask. Paul’s letter to the house churches in Rome takes on those questions all the time. In the portion we read this morning, Paul tries to explain God’s Spirit. Paul talks about the spirit in us – the human spirit, spirit with a small ‘s’ and the Spirit of God, from God, Spirit with a capital ‘S.’

Paul explains the relevance of this new Spirit in the lives of his listeners, by using language that might be better understood by them. First, he uses language of a financial world – words like debt and heirs. Second, Paul uses familial language – words like children, adoption not slavery, and even heirs again.

If we are in debt to something we are perhaps controlled by that thing. Paul doesn’t want our human spirit to be the only thing controlling us. Yes, we must pay attention to the flesh, as far as taking care of these very needy physical bodies we have, but Paul tells us that there is much more to us than that. We were given a human spirit when we were born, but the Spirit of God changes that spirit. From a spirit of slavery with all of it’s fear and obligation and constraint, into a spirit of adoption, with its love and choice and freedom. The beauty, Paul says, is that very Spirit of God is working *with* our human spirit, to tell us that we are children of God. Children who would call their father, Abba, a term that connotates intimacy.

And this is where our scripture texts come together – they both tell us that God loved us. Enough for us to be called children, enough to partner with our human spirit so that the whole world may experience the kingdom of God.

Is there anything stirring inside of you, inviting you to shift a perspective, inviting your curiosity? Where is the Spirit of God trying to team up with the human spirit in you?

Let us pray…