

“A Collaborative Labor”

May 30, 2021

Sermon by Dawn Jefferson at TriCon Church on Zoom

John 3:1-17

Will you pray with me?

God, we pray that on this day you will make us over through your Love. In the name of our Creator, Our Liberator, and Your Spirit we pray, Amen.

I had not read this Nicodemus scripture in a long while. As a very young Christian, we are taught to memorize John 3:16 as the premise for Christianity, a sort of Cliff's Notes for God's intentions and our salvation. As everything else, my returning to the text as an older person who is embarking on her 2nd career, the story of Nicodemus is more relevant and enlightening. It has brought to my spirit a great deal of meditation about my first career - being an English teacher.

One of the hardest principles I had to teach as an English teacher no matter what grade -- was **revision**. Our curriculum valued what we call the writing process and it offered a framework of how to begin an essay and the various stages one goes through: from Brainstorming, Outlining, Drafting, Revising, and Editing. Sure there were some students who struggled with beginnings and finding an idea of what to write about, but eventually the real hurdle was revision. My lessons on the topic invited students to the definition of revision -- to see again; to look back; to bring fresh eyes to what they formally had composed. Difficult.

It was challenging to convince them that after their labor in composition there was still more work to do and even greater possibility if they would detach themselves from the first draft and imagine another direction, a different perspective. The tension and conflict that would often arise in a revision session was when a student had assumed themselves to have revised but had merely edited. That is to say, they went away for a night's homework

and checked their grammar, tweaked some diction, maybe even replaced a quotation for another but in large part the paper was pretty much the same. I could never be certain if it was just ego or fear that kept so many of them from truly RE-VISING their essays to make more significant assertions.

Now, as I am older and after having taught English for almost 20 years, there are things I understand about that writing process and the Spirit that I think Nicodemus had to contend with too.

First, we get overwhelmed when we think it's all on us to do spiritual work. I

continue to wonder how much stress we put ourselves through when we encounter Spiritual invitations like Nicodemus'. I think that when I was 15 someone saying “be born again” felt like “that’s a doable act.” But when we ask someone who is 70 to be born again, the request seems to fall a bit differently. Is Christ asking Nicodemus to undo all that he has acquired? Nicodemus is a leader on the Sanhedrin court, a well-known Pharisee who decides religious law. Is he supposed to start from scratch? I empathize a great deal with Nicodemus, like him, I get stuck in my head often. I think things to death, over analyze, complicate it even more because I get stuck in the orb of my own ability. I wonder about what is being asked and how I can handle it or *maybe not handle it*, what are my limitations?

But the work - the LABOR that Christ refers to in the birthing of one's new life in the Spirit - is exactly NOT an independent construction. Nicodemus' being born again is not in fact something to be done. **It is Some One to be.**

And that being is not made possible out of Nicodemus' own strength, his status, his success or intellect. He can't think himself into being born anew and he can't work himself into being born anew. New life from Christ has to do with **our** willingness and the **labor** of God. Not just the creator alone, but the work of the Trinity. In this famous section of scripture we hear about John 3:16, but we must also consider the previous context, and that is where John identifies what I am calling “the CO-LABOR of the Trinity.”

Second, the trinity is a model of collaborative work and interdependent relationships. God is the creator and author, God is the parent and originator. Life flows from God's loving and from the conception of God's concern, but life is brought to pass, it BECOMES because of the Holy Spirit, Her breath. Our physical lives, our flesh comes to life through our mother's water breaking, but our spiritual lives come to life again through the Spirit's flowing. Both births are necessary, both births make us truly alive.

Then there is Christ, the embodiment of this God-life, the Word of Truth, the story himself. There is Christ - the incarnation of God's presence and love talking with Nicodemus in the middle of the night. Christ is standing there being God and talking to Nicodemus about his future and his faith. He is answering Nicodemus' question -- that is the question so many of us ask even after we have been confirmed, or joined a church or lived a long life, our soul still asks God - **how can I DO this?** Christ scolds him a bit, saying how can you be a leader of the church and not know that you cannot DO new life, you must become. Any parent or gardener, any artist or scientist understands becoming, it has been part of their own labor and livelihood. Things, people, plants, sculpture, programs don't just happen automatically. They grow over time. They require revision and restarting; they take more than tweaking, sometimes great overhauls to BECOME. Surely the same will be true with our own spiritual formation.

Third, spiritual work is a gradual, recursive process. One challenge is that our culture does not encourage recursive thinking, recursive living as much as linear thinking and linear living. We imagine too often in lines of success and victory. This, then that, then the finished line. But, the more we live, the more we can see the circles, the recursive cycle of change. We see the growing and the failing and the needing and the reaching. We see gains and losses, acquire wisdom and insight. We discern new things and become more of ourselves, more of who God desires us to be through a process of the Spirit that is not a linear list of checked boxes, of definitive failures or consistent "wins". People keep asking me now that I've graduated, are you going to get a PhD now, what will you DO next, I bet it'll be big. It will be big. My next step is

to go and sit with my mother in her small apartment in Assisted Living and to ask her to tell me the story of her childhood again, to listen to the parts she remembers and the parts she will rewrite about her life. My next step is to get in my travel trailer with my wife and visit different national parks and look again at how the trees are different and how the land slopes and bends around its water source. I am confident that through spiritual connection I will continue becoming a minister. I am less concerned about what I will do and more with **who I will be** next.

The media has been using the term “RETURN to work” in the last few weeks. It doesn't ring true for me mostly because I didn't stop working during COVID, I still had classes and homework. Most people I know worked harder during COVID than they ever had in their lives. Even more importantly though, I was working on my relationships, and doing self work as well. And because I was in one place, I tried to focus less on the doing and more on the being. My well being became a greater focus. How I was feeling was valued more than what I accomplished. Sure, I needed to submit an assignment, but how did I feel about it? Did it seem worth my time to have conceived it? Was there worthier time to be spent looking beyond myself, like sitting on my porch and counting the birds, or engaging my fury regarding state violence. Christ's conversation with Nicodemus challenges us all to make the true connection between the spiritual wind that blows even when we do not see it. We are less likely to be connected to our tangible labor if we do not perceive the true spiritual transformation at work within and around us.

Lastly, This spiritual work and this story of salvation that is being written through us is a collaborative labor of LOVE. I think that we often misunderstand God's incentives and process, particularly in John 3:16. We say we want people to do as God does, but we don't really pay as much attention to the incentives of the 16th verse. God doesn't come to earth because he hates the world, or judges the world, or is even tired of the world. God first LOVES the world. And TriCO, if you don't hear anything else in this sermon it's this **Fourth and final point: God is showing us that new life begins when we first LOVE the world.** Not that we mimic it or even just

critique it, not that we join in on every dance, but that we LOVE this place that is consumed by death-culture, love it so much that we would risk being born anew to be in relationship with it and bring about NEW LIFE.

We have spent months, a year separated from the world. Some of us have grown afraid of the death and poverty on our TVs, the violence in our newspapers, and grief outside our doors. We may run to nature because it feels soothing and less complicated or we remain in our own neighborhoods because they feel familiar and safe. BUT GOD stepped out on the edge of eternity and God loved this complicated world enough that God reconstituted God's own self. Now, I'm not saying that we have to die for these places overwhelmed with despair, Jesus already did that. But I do wonder what it would look like if we truly LOVED God's people of THIS world. The messed up, unrelenting, selfish, consuming, beautiful, hilarious, broken community. What would it be like if politicians LOVED incarcerated people; what would it be like if we LOVED the people caught in cycles of systemic violence?

Now wait, don't consider the invitation as Nicodemus did. Don't think that God is asking us to Love these communities by ourselves, in our own flesh, in our own strength as an independent creature. No, that, that would be IMPOSSIBLE; I would bail on that too. But with the help of the Trinity -- as modeled by God, Jesus, and Spirit. If we were to engage each of them. If we were to REVISE the way we see the world and people around us. If we were to decide not to be overwhelmed or disgusted, or If we were to be angry and frustrated AND to still Love the world's people, who God first loved... how would it require us to live anew? We must revise what we think and believe about our "lowercase-L" love and incorporate God's big LOVE -- that is not merely emotion and feeling, or clicking hearts on Facebook. NO, God's LOVE GOT UP and acted and changed God's self. God was born again out of God's own love! Christ came out of God's love. The Spirit came out of Christ's love. Your life is being sustained out of the Spirit's love for you. What will become of our love as it transforms from the "little L" to the big Love of the Divine?

In my last ten years of teaching English I embraced a different model of the writing process and that was **peer revision**. I began to coordinate that each student have two other people share comments about their draft; they made notes about their own wonderings, compliments, and concerns. In making the revision process collaborative, students were able to take greater risk and rethink their initial compositions. They were bolder to cross out paragraphs, change their topic sentences, and imagine a different purpose for their essays. For the drafts of this very sermon, I started writing about the story of my birth and my mother's labor, how she needed the voice of her sister to coach her out of a dangerous medical moment, then I considered the life cycle of the cicada (which I may preach on next week). But then I revised my original plan and shared as I have about writing an essay because it's something that I know well, and then I let myself start over. I went to visit my mother, I said a prayer, I listened to the Holy Spirit, read this aloud to my wife, and here we are.

And friends, on this Trinity Sunday, I am asking that you consider the collaborative labor of love that God's been engaged in from the very beginning. What requires DEEP revision in your life and what can God TRANSFORM in you? Then reflect on the CO-LABOR in your relationships today. Consider your CO-LABOR with all parts of God on this final day of spring. I invite you to imagine what it would look and feel like for you to step into yet another rebirth. What would the renaissance of you look like and be like? No matter how old you are, no matter what job you have or don't have.. Which people of this world could the Holy Spirit change your heart to love and embrace? What cause or purpose could Christ's example inspire you to engage with? What collaborative labor can become alive in you with ALL of God?

Amen