

“Missing the Point” – John 3:1-17

I'm sure most of you have seen the TV commercial for cellphone service that uses the famous line, “Can you hear me now?” People quickly grabbed hold of that line, as they have done with so many great advertising lines, and used it to ask not whether the other person can literally hear them, but whether the other person can understand what they're trying to say. The expression soon became a metaphor for, “now do you understand?”

Of course there weren't any cell phones in Jesus' day, but I'm sure there were similar expressions. Misunderstandings were at least as common then as they are now. We often think that education and training can overcome these misunderstandings, but that's not always the case – take for one example the image of a befuddled professor! Take a peek also at that conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, so we know that he was as highly educated as anyone could have been in those days, schooled and proficient in Scripture, Theology and even Law. Nicodemus was no fool - he even knew enough to approach Jesus secretly, “under cover” so to speak, which is a better understanding of the word translated in our scripture as “at night”. He was certainly smart enough to know that declaring to Jesus, “you are from God”, was enough to land him in very serious trouble. Getting caught uttering such heresy would have cost him at least his position, if not his life!

However, Nicodemus still had an incomplete understanding of who Jesus was, and the role he had come to play. His understanding of “from God” was not quite complete enough, or deep enough, or full enough. In a delightful intellectual exchange, which is absolutely hilarious to those who are into mind games, Jesus toyed with him at an intellectual level, calling for birth “from above”, which Nicodemus hears as being physically born “again” – not surprisingly since the same Greek word can be interpreted both ways. Jesus reveals Nicodemus' misunderstanding by going on to explain the nature of what he meant by a birth “from above” – a new life born of the waters of baptism and the Holy Spirit. Even if we can't hear Jesus directly asking, “can you hear me now?”, we can hear from Nicodemus' answer that he still didn't get it, that he still didn't understand, that he continued in his confusion.

Not only was poor old Nicodemus confused, he was not the only one, and the confusion over this issue lasted a long, long time. That confusion lasted at least until the time John wrote his gospel, because in order to help clear up the confusion John added part of a later, post-Easter sermon to try to explain what Jesus meant. As evidence we see a shift from the singular “you / I” of the Jesus and Nicodemus conversation to the plural “you / we” of a larger (and later) audience. The conversation now links Christian baptism with the Holy Spirit and refers to Christ's ascension as a past event, even while He dialogues with Nicodemus. A covert conversation between two individuals thus becomes a presentation of two widely divergent perspectives on life before God. One perspective understands faith as the acting out of proof texts, following prescribed behaviours, displaying defined patterns of faithful obedience on a long and arduous climb into the kingdom of God. The other insists that life in the kingdom is a gift given by God, unobtainable any other way than by accepting the gift, a gift uncontrolled by humans but instead blown to and fro by the Holy Spirit of God.

The confusion continues today. Just as Nicodemus misunderstood the kind of rebirth called for by Jesus, many Christians today still misunderstand. Nicodemus thought in very literal terms of a physical rebirth, and while faithful today do understand Jesus referred to a Spiritual rebirth they also often think in very literal terms of a prescriptive formula for that change. In both cases people miss the point of Jesus calling for a radical shift from succeeding at religion to having eternal life given freely.

That is indeed a radical message, but the message itself is not new. God's grace is not something new, as though he had somehow mellowed over the ages. God's grace was evident even in

ancient times, as the Hebrew scriptures point out in the story of the brazen serpent. The text proclaims what has always been true of God, and what is comforting again: God loves the world; God desires that none perish; God gives the Son that all may live; God has acted in Christ not to condemn but to save. Set against that ageless message of God's grace the silent question from Jesus rings out from John, "can you hear me now?"

Sadly the answer "not really" to that question comes from modern-day Nicodemus's, people of intense faith who in their intensity have carved a narrow, stone-walled path leading, so they believe, into God's kingdom. People who dare not ask probing questions in the open light of day for fear of condemnation from their fellow believers; faithful, and yes they are faithful, but who can only hope to explore the possibility of expanding the tight and narrow boundaries of their faith in covert, under-cover discussions. Sadly such people still rise at General Assembly to protest articles in the Presbyterian Record that dare to ask radical questions. Others who proclaim, even as we celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the Ordination of Women in our denomination, that they would never call a woman minister. Still others, deep in misunderstanding of the depth of God's grace in this radical message, continue to reject many from full participation in Christ's body, the Church. Apparently they really can't "hear Him now."

Fortunately there were those who heard Jesus ask, in subtle ways, "can you hear me now?", and who responded with a loud, "yes, we can". Faithful disciples, surrendering their new lives in Christ and spreading far and wide, and to all peoples, the message of the gift of God's grace, the gift of new life freely available from God through his Holy Spirit. There were those who heard, and who opened their houses so the faithful could gather, could welcome newcomers who also heard, could celebrate their new life in baptism with water and the Holy Spirit. Learned authors documented in letters and gospels God's magnificent gift of grace and providing guidance on how to live in the new life that was the gift of that grace. Preachers offered themselves throughout the centuries proclaiming the message of God's grace. Transformed Nicodemus's who worked in seminaries to find ways to help people hear the message of God's grace. Eager faithful, who passed on the understanding of the joy of the new life offered in Christ.

And the rebirth in water and the Spirit made possible through Christ is not just for individuals alone. This congregation, our beloved Central Church, as many of you know and as some of you experienced personally, experienced that rebirth a few years ago. It was a painful process, as birth tends to be, but it was also a hugely life-giving transition, and we continue to explore the new directions in which Christ calls us, the new gifts we have been given by the Spirit, and rejoice in the love and grace with which God covers us. We are able to understand, and to live and proclaim that closing message that underscores the whole conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, the message that God sent His only Son into the world to save the world, not to condemn the world but that the world, that we and all who accept God's love in Christ, would have eternal, rich and abundant life.

Just as none of us go instantly from birth to adulthood, but experience instead a long learning and growing period, so too we as a congregation continue to learn and grow as children of God. It is inevitable that we will from time to time trip and stumble, even skin our knees as active children do. But it is also certain that God, the prototype loving parent, will pick us up, dust us off, dry our tears and send us running and laughing back out to play. As brothers and sisters in and of Christ we will continue to learn and grow, empowered by the Holy Spirit to answer that question, "yes, we surely can hear you now!"