

“Big Changes” – John 3:1-17 – Lent 2 – Feb 17/08

We live in an age of communication like at no other time – Blackberry’s, email, instant messaging, Skype video conferencing on the internet, teleconferencing around the globe. The amount of telecommunication traffic is at levels never dreamed of only fifty years ago. And yet for all of the messages going back and forth we also live in an age of misinformation like at no other time. For all that we are transmitting and receiving – uploading and downloading – at unprecedented levels, most of the time we are still not communicating effectively. I don’t mean through just the deliberate disinformation – read “outright lies” – pumped out by politicians, governments, corporations, advertising agencies, activist groups, and yes – even churches. Even though our means of sending and receiving messages have improved dramatically over sending the young lad running through the streets with a scrap of paper, the messages still aren’t getting through any better.

But even a face-to-face encounter is still not a guarantee of good, clear and effective communication. Sometimes we simply smile and nod to indicate understanding and to mask the fact that we have no clue what the other has just said. This phenomenon of misunderstanding through bad communication is nothing new, either. Lack of comprehension or just plain misunderstanding were at least as common in Jesus’ day as they are now. Education and training not only don’t necessarily make things better, sometimes they are a disadvantage! For an example, take a peek at that conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus that we just read.

John tells us that 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. This Nicodemus was no fool. He was even smart enough to approach Jesus secretly, “under cover” so to speak, which is a better understanding of the word translated “at night”. He was astute enough to understand that if his declaration to Jesus, “you are from God”, were to be leaked to the press there would be a mighty uproar, and he would even lose his cushy teaching job.

Even with that declaration, Nicodemus still didn’t completely understand who Jesus was, and the role he had come to play. Jesus, in good rabbinical style, toyed with him at an intellectual level, calling for birth “from above”, which Nicodemus hears as being physically born “again”. Jesus reveals his ‘gotcha’ of Nicodemus 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. It is pretty clear from Nicodemus’ answer, “how can this be?”, that he still didn’t get it, that he still didn’t understand, and so he went on his way still confused.

We shouldn’t be too hard on poor old Nicodemus in his confusion, for he would not be the only one, because the confusion over this issue would last a long, long time. Some confusion certainly lasted at least until the time John wrote his gospel, because in order to help clear things up he added part of a later, post-Easter sermon to try to explain what Jesus meant. Note that at verse 7 the text shifts from the singular “you / I” of the Jesus and Nicodemus conversation to the plural “you / we” of a larger (and later) audience, now linking Christian baptism with the Holy Spirit, and referring to Christ’s ascension as a past event.

Thus a covert, in-the-cover-of-darkness conversation between two individuals moves to 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 not controlled by humans but instead blown to and fro by the Holy Spirit of God. As the theologian Fred Craddock puts it, “the shift from succeeding at religion to having eternal life [given freely] is as radical as being born anew.”

But the message itself is not new. God's grace is not something new, as though He had somehow mellowed over the ages. His grace was evident even in ancient times, as early as the defining moment of the Exodus. It is important to remember that God delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt first – then afterwards presented the Law through Moses. This text in John's gospel 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.

The burning question that still hangs in the air after Nicodemus' confused exit is, then, what does this new life look like? The furor and heated dialogue about whether the rebirth with water and the Spirit is 'again' or 'from above' is a futile and meaningless diversion. The real question is, what does this new life look like?

And to that question, unfortunately for some avid groups, there is no one single 'right' answer. There is no divine cookie-cutter that stamps out certified, genuine rebirthed Christians. The gifts of the Spirit are given in as many ways as there are people, and the tasks to which we are called in the Spirit are as varied as the personalities that respond. There are some common characteristics that are displayed in this new life in the Spirit, and they are recognized as the results, as the fruit of the Spirit. While Paul says to the congregation at Galatia, "the works of the flesh are obvious ...", he continues, "by contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

We see evidence of this contrast and change in Nicodemus' life. Where initially he goes away from this first encounter with Christ confused and uncertain, later we see him later arguing that Jesus deserved to be treated fairly under the law and receive a hearing (this after Jesus had upset people in the temple). Even later we see the change is complete in Nicodemus as he helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial. Big changes in Nicodemus, from righteous Pharisee to faithful Christian.

What then does this mean for us here at Central – as part of the body of Christ, reborn of water and the Spirit, what will this new life look like for us? We can't be sure of the specifics, but we can be assured of the 'new' part, that we will continue to change and be changed by the Spirit moving in us, inviting, urging, prodding and encouraging us to respond to calls to specific actions, specific ministries. We have seen some of that happen over the past several years – the Community Breakfast ministry, still going strong after 10 years; a harmonious shared ministry with two other congregations, Galilee Korean and Christ Alive; the International Student Ministry in its various forms. The Hummingbird Ministry that was birthed by Central is now a ministry of our Presbytery and continues to blossom and grow – and we expect that Mary Fontaine soon will be ordained. Families in Recovery, a program to help new mothers who are victims of addiction bond with their newborns and start a new life of parenthood, continues to develop and God willing we will have the first placement of mother and child with a host family later this Summer. What's next? – I'm sometimes afraid to ask, but I'm excited about the possibilities at the same time.

So ... big changes are part of our faith, both individually and as a community of believers. Scary? Yes, changes are almost always a bit scary. Exciting? Certainly! Fulfilling? Without a doubt, as we more and more come to realize that the changes Christ brings about in us are changes born in love – the overwhelming, mind-boggling, against-all-reason love of God. A love so complete that He sent his Son "not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." Thanks be to God for the gift of new life in Christ through water and the Spirit!