

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT, March 8, 2020
“Transition and Transformation” (John 3:1-12)

I have a favourite Zen story. It goes like this. A professor once visited a Japanese master to inquire about Zen Buddhism. While the master quietly served tea, the professor talked about Zen. When the visitor’s cup was full, the master kept pouring. Tea spilled out of the cup and began to flow over the table. “The cup is full”, the professor exclaimed. “No more will go in.” “Like this cup”, said the master: “You are full of your own assumptions and opinions. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”

Nicodemus reminds me of that professor. Like so many others, he has sought out Jesus. But unlike those who come longing for healing for themselves or their loved ones, Nicodemus is not approaching Jesus in his need. Unlike those with burning questions, who realize something is missing in their lives, he appears to think he has his act together. Notice his opening line: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God.” This is Nicodemus’ first meeting with Jesus. He has not had an opportunity to enter into conversation with him and yet, he knows just who Jesus is. He has put him in a nice little box, and labelled him “rabbi”, “teacher”.

How easily we human beings put each other in nice little boxes, and assume we know the correct label to apply. At a lunch and learn at Richmond Hill United Church, the facilitator gave us this scenario. We are about to embark on a airplane trip. We have a choice of seat mates. Among the possibilities is a person who has been incarcerated for 27 years. Another has tattoos and a bald head. Immediately, images popped into our minds. We wouldn’t want to be beside a

hardened criminal or what sounded like a member of a biker gang. “Well,” said our facilitator, “the first is South African President Nelson Mandela and the second is a toddler going through cancer therapy.” Oh...On what tiny bits of information or tidbits of gossip, we form our opinions and pass judgements. How often we approach an encounter with our minds already made up: “this is what they will be like based on their reputation or appearance; their race or class or sexual orientation.”

Nicodemus knows who Jesus is. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus has spent years studying the scriptures and discussing the laws and regulations. He has a firm idea on how to lead a life pleasing to God. He is an expert, the sort of authority an individual would consult when dealing with a thorny issue. We may be living in a very different society from first century Israel, but we too are familiar with experts. When we are struggling to complete our income taxes and cannot make sense of the instructions, we turn to someone who knows the rules and is good with figures. When our computer won't co-operate, we consult an IT specialist. When we need an operation, we want a surgeon who has studied long and hard, and has years of experience. Experts are a precious commodity.

There can be a problem, however. As we human beings acquire knowledge, as we gather experience, our minds tend to become more closed. We naturally start to block information that disagrees with what we have learned previously and accept information that confirms our current approach. We may say to ourselves: “I already know how to do this. I don't need any new approach.” I was looking over the pattern for the “Welcome” banner the quilting group at

Richmond Hill United Church was creating. I heard the term “paper piecing” mentioned, and noticed Penny Fabbro demonstrating, but I concluded: “I can produce the square of flying geese using a technique I already know.” I was confident. After all, I had been sewing on this same Singer’s Featherlight machine since I was ten. I had taken Home Economics in High School and quilting courses at the Haliburton School of the Arts. What could go wrong? When I sewed on the diagonal across the squares and flipped them, the triangles didn’t want to match up. “Oh well,” I thought, “I am good at easing here, and stretching there to make things fit. In the end, it will all work out.” When I joined the three rectangles together, the triangles didn’t come to a point, and my square had angled sides. This piece was beyond redemption.

As we acquire knowledge, our minds may become more closed. At the same time, we may gravitate towards those who share that same expertise and agree with us. In Jesus’ time, Pharisees naturally gathered with other Pharisees. In our time, with the coronavirus, we see the WHO and health advocates from many nations pooling their wisdom as they try to come up with ways to stop the spread and develop a vaccine against COVID-19. Such gatherings whether they be of Pharisees or health experts make a lot of sense. These people share a similar passion and outlook. They can benefit from hearing each other’s ideas. But what happens if experts refuse to listen to anyone outside their field, be it an upstart wandering teacher and healer from the backwater region of Galilee or an ophthalmologist in Wuhan province who was accused of “spreading rumours” and “sharing false information” when he tried to blow the whistle on this new

coronavirus? What happens with all of our new technology if we only read the posts and blogs and tweets that agree with us, if we automatically dismiss those from people with different political or theological views? We might hang onto our certainty we are right, but what about our learning and growing into the whole, beautiful human beings God would have us be?

Nicodemus comes to Jesus certain of who he is - a Pharisee well versed in scripture - and who Jesus is - a teacher come from God. He knows.

Nicodemus as a religious leader is a veteran of many an intellectual tussle. He can debate and argue with the best of them. He is ready, or thinks he is, for whatever Jesus throws at him. Jesus does not have any tea to pour, but he does have his voice. He cuts right across the flow of flattery without any sort of usual acknowledgement like: "thank you for those kind words." Jesus doesn't pick up on anything - signs and teaching - Nicodemus has touched on. Jesus says: "Truly, truly I say to you unless one is born anew / born again / born from above, one cannot see the realm of God." Come again?! I thought I had a challenge when Penny sat me down with the design of a cup and saucer traced on tissue paper and instructions about cutting pieces of fabric the right size that when flipped, they would more than fill the space. At least, she didn't take away my sewing machine or change the rule about stitching right sides together. Jesus tosses everything up in the air.

Nicodemus is left floundering: "how can someone be born who is old?" Commentators tend to be highly critical of Nicodemus: Jesus is talking about "seeing the realm of God" - that longed for realm of justice and peace - and all

Nicodemus can contemplate is how impossible it would be for even a baby, let alone a fully grown adult, to crawl back into the mother's womb to be born again. Nicodemus is taken to task for being literal-minded and far too concrete: he doesn't get that Jesus is speaking metaphorically with images and layers and layers of meaning.

Jesus' response - his talk of being born of water and the Spirit, and of the wind the blows where it wills - only deepens Nicodemus' confusion. All this accomplished Pharisee can do is ask: "how can this be?" This erudite religious leader. This teacher of Israel reduced to the sort of question a child might pose. I don't think that Jesus is trying to win an argument with Nicodemus by making him feel like a fool. Rather, Jesus is deliberately knocking away the props that allow Nicodemus to say: "we know", and view himself as the expert with nothing really left to learn. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to change his approach from "I know" to "I don't understand"; from having to say his piece, to stepping back, observing and listening. Nicodemus is being encouraged to adopt what Zen refers to as a beginner's mind: to drop his expectations, and preconceived ideas about Jesus, and God's ways in order to see things with fresh eyes, and approach them with an open mind, curiosity and wonder.

Does Nicodemus change? Is he transformed? We are not told: this dialogue just trails off into a sermon addressed to the entire Johannine community. All that we learn later in the gospel of John is the Nicodemus argues with his fellow Pharisees on behalf of Jesus, and goes to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body for burial. That may be unsatisfying for those of us who like our stories with

all their ends firmly tied up. But the author of John isn't worried about that. His concern is: how will we, the readers, respond? Will we let go of our certainties, our "I know" attitude, our "been there, done that" dismissal of new possibilities? Will we adopt a beginner's mind, opening ourselves to ongoing learning and growing as God's beloved children?