

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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March 8, 2020 – Second Sunday of Lent

## **Digging Deep Wells**

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again,  
you cannot see the Kin(g)dom of God.” – John 3:1-17

I wrote this song about this story of Nicodemus and Jesus. You may recognize the tune. (The tune from the television show *The Beverly Hillbillies*)

Let me tell you now a story about a man named Nick,  
A rich Pharisee on whom life had paid a trick  
The kinfolks said “there’s a man you better see”  
So he loaded up his stuff and went to meet Je...

...sus, that is. Life-Giver. Sign-doer.

So he went to meet this man who had aroused such hope,  
He swallowed down his pride and gave up trying to cope.  
Jesus he went to see\_, just before the morn,  
And was told that to really live he must be reborn...

From above, that is, through water, through Spirit.

Well the first thing you know, Nick is real confused,  
On matters anatomical he was heard to muse.  
“Look,” Jesus said, “if you want to be free,  
the only thing to do is to watch and follow me.”

Well, I can just hear you thinking, “Better not give up your day job, Ross. You’ll never make a song writer. But if you try out for *Canadian Idol*, you’ll surely be one of the acts they include for comic relief.”

In the gospel according to John, Jesus is a matter of life and death. He is the

bringer of life, abundant life, eternal life. Not to respond to him is to embrace death, but not physical death.

Nicodemus (Nick for short) might be any respected or respectable person, who has found much success in life, but still yearns for something more, for a sense of the vitality and joy that get lost when you are busy being a successful businessman and a respectable community leader and a reliable husband and father. Perhaps he is a person in mid-life who wonders if there is more to life than what he has already experienced. He has heard that Jesus has turned water into wine and wonders if a little zest can be added to his life. He has heard that Jesus cleared the temple of the loan sharks and profiteers and wonders if this courageous passion for social justice is what he is missing. And this Jesus comes along, and Nicodemus realizes that here is someone who seems to have what he is looking for. So he goes to see him. He recognizes that Jesus is a teacher from God, for, as he says, “no one could do the things that you do apart from God.” Jesus praises his insight: Nicodemus has recognized the signs of God’s kingdom and he couldn’t have seen this without being born from above. Jesus is saying that Nicodemus could not have recognized God’s presence in his ministry without being born from above.

The dialogues in John are often enigmatic and frustrating. Jesus doesn’t seem to answer questions directly. In fact, sometimes his answers don’t seem to address the questions at all. But this much is clear: Jesus speaks of a spiritual birth and a spiritual life that is distinct from physical life. He speaks of the invisible moving the visible. He speaks of wind and spirit as powerful creative forces of life. He speaks of water, the waters of baptism into a new life, as the key that unlocks the door to abundant life. And he speaks of himself as the trustworthy guide who can show the way because he alone has made the journey from and to God. For he is the expression of God’s love, the one precious to God, whom God has sacrificially given so that whoever receives him may have a full and lasting life.

We encounter in these statements what is sometimes called the “scandal of particularity.” And it is scandalous to claim that of all the people who have ever lived, this Jesus is the only one who mediates abundant life and reveals God’s presence. What about the Buddha? What about Mohammed or Bahauallah or Mary Ellen White or Joseph Smith or any of the other gurus and prophets and spiritual

leaders who have revealed a new path to their followers? What about science and the scientists who have contributed so much to the abundance and longevity of our lives?

These are important questions. They have always been important, but as the world becomes a global village and people of other faiths are increasingly our neighbours, they become ever more so. There are a couple of things that need to be said in response to these questions. The first is that Jesus is not identical with Christianity. Christianity is the system of belief and practice that cherishes Jesus' memory, but it is not Jesus himself. And it is Jesus himself who is the one who mediates God's presence, and the risen Jesus may be present even where his name is not mentioned. So, the Roman Catholic scholar Karl Rahner, for example, refers to "the anonymous Christ" who is present in several other faiths.

The second is that Christianity is a means to an end. The pathway is not the destination. All religions are human responses to experiences of the sacred. In all times and places, people have had a sense of a sacred reality that is not easily described, but which they recognize is essential to being fully alive. In order to convey those experiences, and to help others achieve them, they develop sacred writings, teachings, doctrines, rituals, practices and so forth.

Religions are human responses to sacred reality. They are traditions and communities that share wisdom and practices intended to help people encounter the sacred dimension of life. They are fallible. Sometimes they go seriously off track and promote the very opposite of the reality of God. They are not identical with God. But with very rare exceptions, most people experience the sacred presence of God through the practices and teachings of a religious tradition. The tradition mediates God's presence and is a sacrament of God's presence. Huston Smith once said that religious traditions are to spirituality what institutions of learning are to education. It is theoretically possible to learn about the world and to become educated without going to school or university or even reading a book, but it is like reinventing the wheel in every generation, and there are all kinds of errors that you can fall into along the way. In the same way it is theoretically possible to encounter spiritual reality and become a spiritual person without religious traditions and communities, but it is much more difficult, and it is easy to lose your

way.

Religions, in spite of their diversity, have much in common:

- They are all concerned with a sacred dimension of reality which is not immediately obvious to the senses, but which can still be experienced, even if only in glimpses.
- They all teach that we are more than just body and brains, but that we open out in our depths into the sea of being that we name God, Spirit or Allah.
- They all teach a way or a path by which that sacred reality can be experienced. Marcus Borg writes that “the way of the cross, the way of Lao Tzu, the way of the Buddha, the way of Islam, and the way of Judaism all speak of the same path: the path of dying to an old identity and way of being and being born into a new identity and way of being.” [*Heart of Christianity*, p. 216]
- All religions teach practices and rituals of prayer, worship and service by which that path can be lived out.
- They all teach compassion as the primary ethical virtue of life.
- They all try to express the inexpressible in words and images – writings, doctrines and teachings, art and music. These words and images are often not easily understood, because the content is not something that can be known in the conventional sense.

While religions have much in common, they are not all the same, in the same way that human beings share much, and yet differ enormously in terms of language and culture.

When I lived in Edmonton, I took an adult confirmation group to visit a Sikh place of worship, called a Gurdwara. At first, the place was completely foreign. The art works, the architecture, the ritual practices in which they engaged were all very strange to me. But as our guide explained the meaning of various aspects of the Sikh tradition, much of it began to seem strangely familiar, as if our two very different traditions were drawing from a common source of spiritual wisdom, like two wells might draw from the same underground river.

Religions are the most different in the words and images they use to express the inexpressible, and in the practices they teach. They are the most similar in the way that they point to a reality beyond themselves, and the transformation required to

respond to that reality. If the words and practices are the outer forms, and the reality to which they point is the inner core, then the inner core is what we share, and the outer forms are what divide us. The outer form is important, because it is the sacrament or mediator of the inner core, but it is not the heart of the matter.

Some people speak of religions as being paths up a mountain. At the bottom, the paths are far apart, each winding up through different valleys and alongside different creeks. But the closer you get to the top, the more the paths converge. And when you get to the very top, and encounter the sacred presence of God, you may well find that Jesus and the Buddha and Mohammed and the Bahauallah are all there, contemplating the same reality, from different angles.

A Christian once met the Dalai Lama, the leader of Tibetan Buddhists, and impressed with his wisdom, asked if she should become a Buddhist. “No,” he said, “become more deeply Christian; live more deeply into your own tradition.” Huston Smith once made the same point by saying that if you are looking for water, it is more fruitful to dig one well sixty feet deep than to dig six wells ten feet deep. Going deeper into one tradition of faith is likely to get us closer to the abundant and eternal life that God wants for us than superficial interest in many.

“The Glory of God is a person fully alive.” To become fully alive is to go from shallow to deep, to encounter the sacred presence at the heart of life. We were made for relationship with that reality and without it we are lost. Let us set out on the pathway of transformation, seeking to be reborn anew in each moment to the possibility of being fully alive. Amen.