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RECEIVING GOD'S LOVE

Rev. Frank Breisch

John 3.1-17

When my son, Jim, was in Calgary, ministering to the street people,  
many of whom have no place to live,  
he got very upset about the downtown churches who didn't want the street people to attend  
worship, who said "Get cleaned up and some decent clothes and then you'll be welcome  
here."

The message was clear; if you aren't respectable, you aren't welcome.

When we were at St. Paul's in Banff,  
people would occasionally come to the front door of the church on Sunday morning  
and ask apologetically if it's all right for them to come to worship in jeans and sweatshirts.  
Every time that happened it was another reminder

of how much the church is considered a bastion of respectability.

I don't think they were asking if God considers it to be all right;  
if they really thought God would be offended they wouldn't even ask.

They were asking if people will be offended;

they wanted to know if they appear respectable enough to be accepted.

I have always assured such people that they're very welcome,  
because when I read the Gospels, I see a Jesus who didn't care a bit about respectability.  
In fact, Jesus confounded the respectable and especially the guardians of respectability.  
He did not hesitate to eat with tax-collectors and sinners,

thereby calling those who were totally unrespectable his friends.

And he reserved his harshest words for the respectable Establishment:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees."

Today's Scripture tells about an interview Jesus had with a member of the Establishment,  
and that interview illustrates what I mean.

Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin.

That was a position of religious and political power,  
like a bishop who was also a member of the federal cabinet.

Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus at night;

it was probably a pre-arranged meeting,

when they would have an opportunity to talk without being disturbed.

This was near the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Jesus had attracted the attention of the Sanhedrin by his wedding miracle in Cana,  
where he turned water into wine,

and by his cleansing of the temple.

The Sanhedrin had to pay attention to someone who did things like that,  
and Nicodemus was probably their official representative to check Jesus out.

Nicodemus was very complimentary.

"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher sent from God."

That's quite a statement to make to a man who never had any rabbinical training!

But Jesus ignored the flattery. He got right to the point.

"I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again."

Nicodemus could understand what Jesus meant by "see the kingdom."

That was a common Jewish expression, which meant

to enter the kingdom, to enjoy its blessings,

to have fellowship with God, to be a child of God.

But Nicodemus didn't understand what Jesus meant by being "born again."

He thought Jesus was talking about physical rebirth!

But Jesus was telling him that no one can simply grow into the kingdom.

It's not a matter of becoming old enough or large enough,

as if children were kept out but adults can enter.

It's not a matter of growing intellectually,

by learning enough facts about God or about anything else.

It's not a matter of growing emotionally.

of reaching a state of maturity or becoming a well-balanced person.

It's not a matter of growing morally,

of becoming good enough to enter the kingdom.

Entering the kingdom, being a child of God, enjoying God's favour

requires a drastic change, being born of water and the Spirit.

That was language Nicodemus could understand easily.

Water was used by the Jews to purify themselves from ceremonial defilement.

When a Pharisee came home from the market, he washed himself before eating.

That wasn't a matter of hygiene; it was a religious action.

The world was impure, and water cleansed one from impurity.

**To Nicodemus, water spoke of cleansing.**

And spirit spoke of power and life.

In Hebrew, the same word means breath and wind and spirit.

So think of the creation story, where God breathed into the man and the man became alive.

Think of the vision of Ezekiel, where the wind swept across the valley of dry bones

that had been reunited and covered with flesh and they became alive.

**So the word spirit spoke to Nicodemus of new life.**

Jesus was telling Nicodemus that entering the kingdom requires purification and new life.

And he was telling him that the Pharisees needed this new birth.

Although Jesus was speaking to one man, he used the plural form of "you."

He saw Nicodemus as a representative of the whole group,

and told Nicodemus what the whole group needed to hear:

"All of you must be born anew."

The Pharisees were upright, moral, religious people.

They were leaders of the Jewish nation because of their impeccable religious credentials.

I doubt if any of us here could begin to compare with them in strictness of religion or of life.

Why was Jesus so hard on them?

We could say it was because they were sinful, just as all people are sinful.

The universal human desire to get along without God also existed in their hearts;

like all of us, the Pharisees wanted to run their own lives.  
They expressed their desire to get along without God religiously.  
They acknowledged God's greatness, but they tried to meet God as equals.  
Remember the Pharisee who prayed in the temple?

He was so proud that he was not like other, less religious people.

He told God that he did far more than God commanded.

He was really saying, "God, aren't you fortunate to have someone like me worshipping you?"

Jesus could be reminding Nicodemus that the Pharisees were sinners, like everyone else.

But when we look at the rest of this passage,

especially at that well-known verse John 3.16,

we see Jesus stressing one specific way in which the Pharisees  
needed to recognize that they were wrong.

Jesus told Nicodemus plainly that he had come down from heaven  
to tell people about the things of heaven.

And his message from heaven was this:

**God loves the world so much that God sent God's only Son.**

You know, many of us have heard those words so often  
that we can hardly appreciate what they mean.

Let me say it in different terms.

**God has a passionate love affair with his creatures, with us human beings.**

God loves us intensely, passionately.

**God is in love with us!**

And God showed that love in the most wonderful way that love could be displayed.

God sent Jesus as the gift of God's love.

God sent Jesus to **tell** us how much God loves us.

God sent Jesus to **show** us how much God loves us.

God sent Jesus to reconcile us to God,

to break down every barrier that stands between us and God.

That sinful desire to do without God that we spoke of, which infests every human heart,  
is a rejection of God.

But God didn't send Jesus to condemn us for that,

but to wipe away that barrier by his death and resurrection

and to call us to receive and enjoy the love of God.

Maybe you have trouble with that picture of God  
as a determined lover who relentlessly pursues us,

a God who uses every stratagem to entice us

and seduce us into responding to God's love.

We have heard so much about a demanding God.

Too often we have developed a picture of a God

who is just looking for opportunities to consign us to hell.

Too often we fear a God who resembles a tyrant more than a lover. T

Too often the church has tried to whip us into line by fear and guilt,  
by presenting a God who, like the Greek god Zeus,

is ready to hurl bolts of lightning at anyone who disobeys him.

But that is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Maybe we need to repeat the words of John 3.16 over and over:

God loved the world so much, God loved the world so much, God loved...

We need to do that until we break through our false images

and understand what a passionately loving God Jesus Christ revealed to us.

And that leads us to the evil of the Pharisees.

You see, the problem with the Pharisees was that they believed they had to earn God's favour.

They thought they had to be good enough to be worthy of God's blessings.

And Jesus said, "No! You don't need to earn God's love.

You can't earn God's love. God already loves you. God has always loved you.

All you have to do is open your heart and receive God's love.

That's what I came to tell you, to show you, to give you."

But, for the most part, the Pharisees couldn't accept that,

because if God loves all of us that much,

then the people whom the Pharisees rejected were also loved by God.

Then all the effort the Pharisees had made to earn God's favour were wasted,

and all kinds of people, even those who weren't respectable,

would be cluttering up the kingdom!

The Pharisees refused to give up the monopoly on God's approval which they thought they had.

They chose the darkness of their own self-righteousness rather than the light of God's love.

We can do that, too. We can decide that we don't want any part in a kingdom

in which we'll mingle with the homeless, with drug addicts and alcoholics,

with prison inmates, with the kinds of people we really don't like to be with.

We can insist that God should only accept people like us,

people who are morally and socially and religiously respectable.

**But if we do, we are denying the loving God and Father of Jesus Christ.**

**If we do, we are rejecting Jesus.**

We can do that. But we don't have to. And God doesn't want us to.

God continues to reach out to us with the same persistent, hopeful, unwavering love

God has always had for us human beings.

God continues to speak to us through the living Lord, Jesus Christ.

God speaks to us now, as Jesus comes to us in his word and reminds us

that God loved the world so much that God sent his only Son.

And all we have to do is accept God's love and enjoy it forever.

To the God who loves us with an everlasting love be glory, honour and praise now and forever.

Amen.