

Circle of Mercy Sermon
The Universe of God
John 3:1-17
March 12, 2017

Forgive me if you've heard this story before. We have been intentional about teaching and having Abby use the appropriate names for human anatomy.

There's a lot that we can't control, and this is especially true when it comes to what she actually remembers or repeats. When she was about four, she placed her hands on my abdomen and said, "Mom, I remember when I was in your universe." I realized that she meant to say uterus, so I reminded her of the correct word.

But now, as I think back to that moment, I wonder if she somehow named one of the great mysteries that we as adults sometimes forget – that she at some very primal level "got it" about the meaning of what it means to be born "again" or born "from above." Being "born again" or "born from above" shares a lot of the same characteristics of physical birth, and at the same time it's so much larger than physical birth. It's about being welcomed into this wide and expansive universe and being given the opportunity to be an active participant in it over and over again.

This past week, I was at a Progressive Youth Ministry Conference at Montreat. One of the speakers was Joel Salatin. You might recognize his name from Michael Pollen's book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. Salatin is self-described as a Christian, libertarian, environmentalist, capitalist, lunatic farmer. And in a one-hour lecture, he embodied every single one of these identities.

He had a roomful of "progressive" youth ministers nodding their heads in agreement with his assessment of industrialized farms and food systems in one minute then bristling and grimacing with discomfort in response to an assumption he made about youth development or a theological claim in the next minute.

Even with major philosophical and theological differences, through it all, he made the connection between our spirituality and faith and how we treat the earth – how our redemption is intimately connected to the redemption of the earth. And those were core values about which we could generally agree. Salatin noted that time and time again, the writers of the Bible repeatedly used visceral, concrete, embodied images to illustrate for us some really important spiritual truths – which immediately made me think of our Gospel story for today – the visit that Nicodemus paid to Jesus under the cover of night.

Much like the questions our children ask us, the images of scripture make us pause and wonder and consider our understandings about some of the most basic assumptions we make about things we encounter all the time. And this story from John is no different. We come to this story of Nicodemus tonight, following the past two Sundays of stories surrounded by mystery – the Transfiguration and the Temptation of Jesus in the desert – Jesus glowing in brightness and angels rushing in to care for him after 40 days in the desert. All of these stories, in some way, leave us scratching our heads – in a simultaneous experience of understanding and complete confusion.

When Nicodemus approached Jesus in the night, he blurted out what any of us might blurt out when we meet someone famous or someone we greatly admire. Often, we say what is already basic, common knowledge, what we (and pretty much everybody else) know to be true. And this was no different for Nicodemus as he stated the obvious, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

Without skipping a beat Jesus took Nicodemus right back to the place of mystery. Jesus responded saying, “You’re right Nicodemus. No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

But this tripped Nicodemus up. Taking Jesus literally, he clearly didn't understand what he meant. And Nicodemus didn't hesitate to ask the obvious question: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

In all fairness, I'd say this is a pretty good question, given the flow of the conversation. It doesn't make a lot of sense.

Birth is a powerful, common as mud image. It is visceral – no matter what role you play in it. It ranks way up there on the list of human experiences that we've all been active participants in – our birth mothers having labored each and every one of us into this world. While we may not remember it, we've experienced it. It is memory that is infused within every single cell of our bodies.

I can think of a million adjectives to describe birth: messy, beautiful, terrifying, mysterious, wonder-filled, painful, chaotic, sad, traumatic, exhilarating, surreal, euphoric, heart-expanding, exhausting, heart-breaking. The list could go on and on.

Birth can encompass pretty much every human emotion I can think of, so it's not surprising that Jesus used this image – being reborn – to talk about what it means to be a follower of the way, to talk about what it means to be an active participant in the kingdom of God. It's almost like Jesus is saying, "Don't worry. You've done this before. You already know what is required of you. Even if you can't remember it, your spirit knows."

The exact same list of adjectives can be used to describe what we know to be true when we find ourselves re-born and walking again in the way of Jesus. It's messy, beautiful, terrifying, mysterious, wonder-filled, painful, chaotic, sad, traumatic, exhilarating, surreal, euphoric, heart-expanding, exhausting, heart-breaking. This list, too, could go on and on.

Being re-born is an invitation to join in the work that Jesus embodied. Just as the wind blows and we cannot hear the sound of it or see where it comes from or where it goes, being born of the Spirit is an experience that is embedded in the every single cell of our bodies, as much as our experience of physical birth is embedded in every single cell of our bodies. We know it when we bump up against it. Our minds, spirits and bodies recognize it. We get chills. We laugh. We weep. We jump. We sigh. We inhale. We exhale.

The invitation to be born again – or at least being open to the possibility that it's likely we'll be invited to be re-born again and again and again – how do we prepare ourselves to be ready to join in the long, steady, laboring contractions of God's womb? Or, to use Abby's translation of that image – how do we prepare ourselves to be ready to join in the long, steady laboring contractions of God's *universe*?

Being born again awakens us to the possibility that we might join in God's work of love spread out before us in the wide and wonderful expansiveness of this universe. And we should not be astonished to find Jesus waiting for us to show up, not only in the moonlit and star-strewn shadows of the nighttime but also in the bright sunshine of the daytime.

I invite you in just a moment to turn to a neighbor – maybe someone you don't live with and name where you have witnessed or experienced being re-born. How did you know it was happening? What did you notice in your mind, spirit and body as you witnessed or experienced it?

Being in community together each week helps us remind each other and remember together the countless ways that we are being reborn again and again and again.

Maybe what we just did together is one way we can prepare and actively train our minds, bodies and spirits to ask not “How can these things be?” (which was Nicodemus’ question) but instead to ask “How can these things (that we have just named) NOT be?”

Can we live in the expectation that we will bump up against the mystery everywhere we turn, the mystery that we know is there, that we can’t necessarily see or hear or touch, but that we sense within every cell of our beings to be the most real and good and true thing we know?

Joel Salatin used the image of two handfuls of soil to make this very point. He held up his hands and said: In these two handfuls of soil, there are billions of organisms that sustain us and keep us alive. We are not able to see 99.9% of them with our naked eyes. But, what if we lived with and treated this earth as if we really believed this to be true, that these two handfuls of soil are essential not only to our own well-being and health but to the well-being and health of this whole earth and that God actually expects us to care about it?

He went on to say: In a time when twice as many people are incarcerated as there are engaged in growing our food, we have a big problem. In a time when

we can invent things that we cannot morally, ethically, spiritually or physically metabolize, things that will take 2-3-4 generations to recover from, we have a big problem.

This could be a very long list. We have a lot of big problems.

Being re-born is both a spiritual and a political act. It's a dangerous endeavor that we should consider, expectantly and prayerfully. It invites us into a way of seeing and a way of being in the world with a new set of guiding principles that will more than likely get us into trouble somewhere along the way.

Whenever we accept the invitation to be reborn, we are going to be taking some risks. We are going to be asked to enter into God's universe with a new logic and new way of seeing and being and doing.

After his initial encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus shows up two more times.

The second time Nicodemus appears, he intercedes on Jesus' behalf with other Pharisees. The third time Nicodemus appears, he joins Joseph of Arimathea, described as a "secret disciple," to claim Jesus' body after his crucifixion and death. Nicodemus brought 100 pounds of spices and linens to wrap Jesus' body for burial, which was the custom of the day.

I wonder if the words of Jesus echoed in Nicodemus' ears as he applied the spices and wrapped Jesus' body in linens before placing him in the tomb. "...a body, you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can't see and touch – the Spirit – and it becomes a living spirit." As he tended to Jesus' body, I suspect he wrestled with the questions again on a whole new level: What does this mean? How can this be?

In spite of the unanswered questions, Nicodemus and Joseph showed up in the end. They were there. They witnessed something beyond their comprehension – both in the life and death of Jesus. I'd say that there was some re-birth taking place within the two of them as they stepped out of anonymity, claimed and cared for Jesus' body together. What does this mean? How can this be?

If we are going to be born again, we have to remind ourselves over and over that Jesus did not come into the world to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it is. Rather, Jesus came to put the world right again.

Rather than limiting our understanding of being born again to a one time, I've placed a check mark beside the eternal salvation box, the Gospel of John

throws the door wide open and expands what it means to be born again, what it means to be an active participant in this wild and wonderful world.

Each re-birth that we experience interrupts our standard operating assumptions and habits. Each re-birth that we experience enables us – if we are willing – to join in the on-going work of God in this messy, beautiful, terrifying, mysterious, wonder-filled, painful, chaotic, sad, traumatic, exhilarating, surreal, euphoric, heart-expanding, exhausting, heart-breaking universe of God.

So pay attention. Pay close attention. Listen to the voices calling to you. Stay awake. Feel the winds around you. Go out and seek Jesus. Just try not to be astonished when you find him.

Amen.