

Introduction: We hear from John's Gospel for the next four Sundays. There are many common threads woven through the readings-We can look closely at how Jesus invites people into a deeper relationship with himself and with God who so loves the world.

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that 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." 3Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

SERMON

Once upon a time, someone seeking enlightenment met a master teacher to share a cup of tea. The master poured tea into the guest's bowl while the seeker spoke at some length about all he already knew. The pilgrim spoke on and on and the master kept pouring until tea spilled over the tea bowl onto the floor. Now here is a teachable moment! A cup too full of our preconceptions doesn't have room for wisdom to be poured in.

Nicodemus engages Jesus in conversation with the opening line is "we know"—more a statement and than a question. Jesus pulls the verbal equivalent of pouring tea to overflowing into an already full tea bowl when he tells Nicodemus he needs to be reborn. And Nicodemus is nonplussed—not able to get his head around what Jesus is saying. If we're honest at all, we're just as confused.

There is a question embedded in Nicodemus' confusion: How does this Jesus person embody God's activity in the world?

Jesus' answer isn't simple—He invites Nicodemus to have what some eastern traditions call the beginner's mind. Jesus uses the analogy of rebirth when he invites Nicodemus to go beyond human reasoning and to encounter God's love; embodied in Jesus.

Over the next few Sundays, we'll witness a pattern of encounters where Jesus meets people who have questions and preconceived notions, and are confused. Teaching is only part of his response. Much of what Jesus does is to be a companion when people find themselves at a turning point...and he invites them into a life where God is present with us in all things and beyond this life, we will share a resurrected life with Jesus and with God.

We're not about a history lesson here. We too have our questions and preconceptions. We have our struggles and hopes and dreams. We also

yearn to experience the divine in our lives now. So the words Jesus speaks to Nicodemus are for us too.

Jesus' words to Nicodemus are so familiar that maybe our tea bowl is already full of what we think Jesus' words mean. Lent could be a time for us to be receptive to words so well known they're even referenced in banners at sporting events.

God so loved the world...that God gives us the beloved Son and whoever believes has eternal life.

The tea bowl of our understanding might be so full of the notion that belief is a one off event where we agree intellectually with something Jesus says. Jesus means something more. John's Gospel uses a word for belief that has much more to do with things like trust, commitment, vulnerability, and attachment. All of those words are words we use to think about close relationships. John concludes his Gospel by saying that belief—a relationship of trust and commitment brings life...life in the name of Jesus who offers himself for us in his life, his death, his resurrection and his ascension—or as John says it, his lifting up.

May we be surprised and astounded by God's steadfast love for the world and may we be startled by God's loving activity in our lives and in the world. Amen.