

Mo. Cooper's Message on March 12, 2017

The Prayer for Quiet Confidence:

O God of peace, you have taught us that in returning and rest, we shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be our strength. By the might of your Spirit, lift us we pray to your presence where we may be still and know that you are God.

This morning we are told the story of a night visit. The worthy Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin (the exclusive Pharisee Court) comes to see Jesus, a talked about itinerant preacher.

Now Nicodemus comes to Jesus late at night – perhaps because he is cautious and does not want to be seen visiting this unknown and untested Rabbi, or perhaps he comes under cover of darkness because traditionally Rabbis conferred on the law late at night when no one would disturb their exchange of thought.

No matter the reason...Nicodemus comes and brings a question of sorts. "No one" he says "can do the signs you do unless God is with him." The question implied here may be – "so how are you related to God" or it might be "How can I develop a relationship like yours with God?"

Jesus seems to infer the 2nd question from Nicodemus's statement because Jesus replies "unless a person is reborn from above he cannot see the kingdom of God" or to put it another way, "If you want to develop a relationship like mine with God...you have to be open to change...REAL Change!"

So here we have, late at night, two people of God – one faithful, traditional, and hard working, and the other marginal, remarkable, and lively to the presence of God.

Each man reveres God's will, but only Jesus has tapped into that will. In his commentary on this night visit, William Barclay talks about the difference between Life Everlasting and Eternal Life. Now at first blush – they seem to refer to the same thing – immortality. But Barclay says, life everlasting refers purely to the duration of one's life – in fact an everlasting life could just as easily be hell as heaven (think of the various Zombi shows on TV these days) the idea of everlasting life does not suggest development and change. It, in fact, may imply DOING the SAME THING over and over. Whereas, eternal life comes from the one who is eternal ...GOD.

And in this story, Jesus clearly states that eternal life (or the kingdom of God) can only be attained through spiritual re-birth AKA CHANGE! But not active change...rather spiritual change (that attentive, listening, waiting on God kind of change.) A passive, natural rebirth kind of change (after all being born into this world is not an act of the will but the end of a natural process – we are in utero then it is time to be born.)

I think of the story of the 19th century Bishop of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris who was a great evangelist and inspired preacher and he was also known for telling the story of a young man who had disdain for God. In fact, the Bishop would reflect, the young man was so disdainful that he would stand outside that very cathedral and scoff at worshippers going in and out “THERE IS NO GOD” he would yell at them – “You are Fools/ You are dupes.” He did this many times.

Finally, one day, a priest of the cathedral came out to confront the young man. “So,” the priest said “There is NO GOD – you are alone, brave and independent, is that right?”

“Yes” crowed the man.

“Then” said the priest, “I challenge you to come inside and show me.”

“Certainly,” the young man said with a swagger. “I accept any challenge you offer.”

And so the priest led him inside and up toward the altar.

“Alright now, look at the face of Jesus on the cross”, the priest directed and yell as loudly as can, “Jesus died for my sins and I don’t care.” Well the young man did it.

“Again” the priest directed.

“Jesus died for my sins” the man called out “and I don’t care” – but this second time he had less volume – less conviction.

“Just once more” the priest instructed.

Then as the young man stood there – he opened his mouth – but the words would not form for him. Instead, he found he was weeping.

And as the Bishop would relate this story to the listening congregation, at the end, he would always reveal – “and that young man was me.”

You know every day brings us an opportunity for spiritual change. Maybe it is not as dramatic as the Bishop’s, still everyday we get an invitation to spend time with God – in prayer – in reading the Bible – in sitting quietly we get an invitation to put ourselves in the place where birth is probable.

Like Nicodemus – we may wonder “How, Jesus, can I develop a relationship like yours with God?” And you know what? Over 2 millennia, the answer to that question has not changed.

Be open to the Spirit – allow yourself to be reborn in the Spirit – let God take the lead while you read, pray and listen for God’s voice. So remember the prayer for quiet confidence:

O God of peace, you have taught us that in returning and rest, we shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be our strength. By the might of your Spirit, lift us we pray to your presence where we may be still and know that you are God.

Because the call to spiritual change never goes away. Again Barclay in his commentary tells a story of the 90 year old widow who just lost her husband of 65 years. As her pastor visited he noticed her, he noticed her distress. This is very hard for you,” he said in sympathy.” “Yes” she replied. “I just don’t know what God is calling me to do now.” We are never too old to be open to the Spirit. Amen.