

## *Do you have a minute? I need to tell you something.*

*Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17*

Jesus said: “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. If I told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?” In the immortal words of the captain in the movie *Cool Hand Luke*: “What we’ve got here is failure to communicate.”

So how can this be? Nicodemus is a religious leader and a teacher of law. Jesus is a religious leader and a teacher. They’re both Jewish. How is it that they don’t understand each other? How is it that *we* don’t always understand each other? Like Nicodemus, we can fail and fall victim to making assumptions and living in our biases. Nicodemus makes the assumption in the conversation with Jesus that they are on the same page – but they are not. What the theological banquet teaches us is that when it comes to God and our faith, we do not all speak the same language. We do not all believe the same thing about how God is at work in the world, and we do not all believe the same thing about how God calls us to live our faith in the world. And this is why at times we can be at odds with each other.

The scripture today from the gospel of John and from Isaiah are passages that will speak clearly to the people whose lived faith falls in the expression of the evangelical. Lived faith is exactly how it sounds: it is how we act on what we believe. What we do because we are faithful people. As I mentioned earlier, there are five general expressions of lived faith: they are the Evangelical, the Ecclesial, the Missional, the Ecumenical, and the Spiritual. And don’t worry if you don’t understand all these categories; we will explain them over the next five weeks. The evangelicals are messengers of the Good News. And if you think about it, Jesus was really the first evangelical. Jesus shared the Good News with every person he met. What is interesting about this passage from the gospel of John is that Nicodemus’s lived faith is evangelical as well. Nicodemus comes to Jesus because of the signs that he has witnessed. Nicodemus says, “Rabbi, (which in Hebrew means *teacher*) we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these things that you do apart from being in the presence of God.” Nicodemus, in that moment, realized that the presence of God is with Jesus, and because of this Nicodemus wants to know more. But he does it in the nighttime when others may not see him.

So where’s the failure to communicate? The failure comes because Jesus is speaking symbolically about his faith – about what God is up to in the world – whereas Nicodemus is looking at it in a much more literal, factual way. Nicodemus wants Jesus to explain the idea of rebirth. How can we be reborn? And I love his example: “What, we’re just gonna pop back into the womb and come out again? Is that how it’s gonna work?” And Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh. What is born of the Spirit is Spirit.” Rebirth is a spiritual experience which is available to all people who seek it. Baptism and confirmation is the ritual that acknowledges this rebirth. Rebirth, where we are born not just of water anymore, but also of Spirit. Through Jesus, Nicodemus comes to know God. And through Jesus, we are redeemed. Not to the secular human world – the world of the flesh – but to the spiritual realm. Through Jesus, we are redeemed and we receive eternal life. When he speaks of eternal life here, he is not speaking in the sense of life that lasts

forever and ever, amen. But rather in the sense that we will have a different *quality of life*. A transformed quality of life.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is proclaiming to Nicodemus that God is here on earth, right now. With us and present to us. And Nicodemus has sensed this, which is why he came to speak to Jesus.

One pastor named Emmanuel L. Lartey says: “God’s desire in sending God’s son is not condemnatory. Rather, it is redemptive. The whole mission and purpose of God in Christ is to rescue and recover humanity from being deeply embedded in self-defeating pursuits, in a physically absorbed life. God, in Christ, wishes to reclaim, rename, and reoffer the stories of our lives with a new life powered by grace from God and may manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

I want to say that it is very rare for us to fall in only one expression of lived faith. Throughout our faith journey, we are going to move around and experience different things depending to who we meet, what happens to us, which congregation we’re at...all five expressions are not stages. We don’t start at one and move to the next, and move to the next. It’s more organic, and we flow through. But we will find that one of them will be our most dominant expression. And when push comes to shove, if one of them is missing, if we’re not going to be able to express our faith in this one way...we’re gonna get upset, because we’re feeling like we’ve lost something that is very important to us, that is essential to our being. So like I said, we need to remember that all five expressions of faith are essential and needed in order to flourish as a community of faith. I said that Nicodemus came to know God in a new way through Jesus’ lived experience; through Jesus’ lived faith. The evangelical lived faith desires that people come to know Jesus and God. They long to have conversations about people’s faith and about how God is at work in the world. They take a page out of Jesus’ book and talk to people about how we are to love compassionately and unconditionally. As I mentioned, they pray for others. They believe that forgiveness sets them free to love. They read scripture; they probably can recite scripture from memory. And did you know that the passage from John today is one of the most quoted scriptures ever from the Bible? I bet most of you know it. They also feel a close personal relationship with Jesus, and they feel the Spirit is alive in everyone and want to help each person grow in faith. They probably had a conversion experience. They love and praise God. Jesus is active in their lives. Evangelicals are people who proclaim Jesus crucified and risen, which is a statement in the United Church of Canada *A New Creed*. They are the true messengers amongst us.

Now, terms like Evangelical, reborn, and saved are terms that bring comfort to the evangelical expression of faith. Let’s be honest; in the United Church of Canada, these terms sometimes have negative images that are associated with them. These are three words that sent me running from the church as a teenager. Same three words that made me run even faster when I got to university. I remember how uncomfortable I was sitting in the quad area at the U of A with a fellow youth leader one time who wanted to pray for me. And the prayer lasted for 20 minutes. And I don’t remember a word of it, except for feeling completely uncomfortable. But what I’ve come to realize is that it was very important for that person to express their belief in God by praying for me, and at this point I’ve come to a place where I appreciate that that person took the time and the care to pray for me.

Now, there are some people who have found their way in the United Church of Canada who have a heart in the evangelical expression. And they probably made their way here because at some point they were rejected because of who they were. What we need to acknowledge with expressions of faith is that all five expressions of faith have the potential for the good to go wrong. Janet Gear has created this and speaks of this as the *shadow side* of each expression of faith. We know and have acknowledged that there are times where evangelicals go too far. Where their faith can become exclusive. Where people who live in this expressed faith, their desire and strong belief in Jesus can actually turn people away which is not at all what they want or intend to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 48.

And so what we need to learn to appreciate even knowing that the shadow side exists is that if we didn't have evangelicals who share the message, the world could lose the Gospel message. The church could forget its calling and purpose and move off-track. Now, there is an antidote, kind of like a vaccine for COVID: the antidote for Evangelicals is that they need the Missionals. Evangelicals need to remember that the gospel requires us to live out our faith in the world helping others, not just teaching people about who Jesus is, but acting on what Jesus taught us. As we explore over the next five weeks, we need to learn how to bring all of these into balance. At Roberson-Wesley, you may find people who in this lived expression of faith participating in programs like God on Tap where we talk about our faith, or membership class where people prepare to become full members of the United Church. You can also find them in Bible studies and in worship. Our liturgy of baptism (when we baptize someone), we pray and we say: "Born of water and the Spirit, may you be a faithful witness of Jesus Christ." And when somebody is confirmed or reaffirms the faith that their parents did for them when they were young, we say, "Born of water and the Spirit, may you *continue* to be a faithful servant and witness to Jesus Christ." We also have several people for which this feels weird and awkward and uncomfortable. And yet, what just amazed me so much over the past couple of years is how many of you took the opportunity to share a moment of holy honesty. When we share our faith story from the pulpit, over coffee, we are witnessing, we are testifying to how God and Jesus are at work in our lives and in our world. And by sharing our stories, they inspire others and bring others comfort to realize that they aren't alone. They aren't strange and weird and shouldn't be here. What it helps us to realize is that we're all called to be part of this mission and ministry in the world.

So, if this topic made you feel uncomfortable, think of poor Nicodemus who went to talk to Jesus in the night. He wasn't quite ready for people to know that even though he was Jewish, he was starting to believe things that might be a bit different. Know that there are people here and in the world who live out their faith by sharing their faith story. I hope that during this week, you will watch for that. Look at the people who are sitting near you. Think about the people who are part of this lived faith here at Roberson-Wesley. Who are the evangelical messengers in our midst? Let's get to know them and appreciate in a different way. By sharing the message of God, the Good News, we know that God is active in this world. God is at work in the world, so we give the messengers thanks for sharing the good news.