

Re-membered by the Light

John 3:1-21

Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday, "Following Jesus Together"

"Come and see...." There is so much to see in these 21 verses! There are so many places to stop, to sit down and listen to Jesus, to wait for Spirit's stirring in our hearts. And if there isn't enough in the verses, there's also Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday...and Epiphany.... So, let us come...and see.

Pray....May the Light shine into our darkness...may the Light find us...may we be re-membered....

"What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.... The 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."

These words of Jesus are both obvious and obscure. Of course what is spirit is spirit and what is flesh is flesh. And of course the wind blows where it blows and we don't have any say. These are obvious. But "born of the Spirit"? What on earth could that mean? We know what each of the words means. But what is their meaning in this sentence? Is Jesus speaking in riddles? Does he mean for us to understand?

We've said that the Gospel of John is a re-telling of the Genesis story. John's story of Jesus is a story about the genesis of human beings. The beginning of a "new humanity." Or, a "new creation." In this creation, Jesus is the new "adam." The context of these words ("what is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit") is the creation of humanity. So we begin to understand these words and their meaning. John 1 is the birth story of Jesus, "In the beginning was the Word.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us." "In the beginning...the light shines in the darkness...." Within this genesis story, Jesus is telling *our* birth story, telling...describing...re-storying *our* beginning.

This isn't a riddle. But it remains a mystery...perhaps even a miracle. We have clues and signs. We have bits and pieces of information. But they don't fit into usual ways of thinking and understanding. They don't follow the laws of science and the universe as we know them. So we have to be ready and attentive to this mystery...or for this miracle...or we'll miss the heavenly breeze when it catches our faces. If we aren't paying attention, when the other-worldly wind of God blows, we'll move to protect ourselves instead of letting it sweep through us.

What is born of flesh is flesh...what is born of spirit is spirit.... Jesus isn't giving us opposites. He isn't telling us to choose our spiritual identity and being and to shun our physical being and identity. Our minds go to opposites and opposition because that's part of the binary worldview we live in. Without thinking, we fall into *this* or *that*. *Either/or*. *Flesh/spirit*. *Us/them*. So we likely hear Jesus' words and think he's teaching a hierarchy, that spirit is *better* than flesh. Yet here we are, born of flesh.

But. If we keep these words within the story of the creation of humanity, we hear another possibility. Instead of flesh and spirit being opposites, one being good and the other bad, Jesus is bringing flesh and spirit together. It is flesh *and* spirit that gives life to human beings. In this story of the creation of humanity, we are flesh *and* spirit. "The Word became flesh and lived among us." Other Gospels tell the same story. In Mary's pregnancy we see spirit and flesh in one human being. Jesus as son of God is spirit and flesh. Jesus as the son of Humanity is spirit and flesh in a human being. As a matter of fact, the Genesis story is very much the same. "Then CREATOR God formed the human from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life; and the human one became a living being" (2:7).

Do you see...and hear that? The human became a living being when CREATOR breathed into them. Or, we could say, when CREATOR “spirited into their nostrils the spirit of life.” Their creation was incomplete until spirit inhabited them. Until they were flesh *and* spirit. Body *and* breath. Surely *this* is what Jesus is telling Nicodemus...and us.

Interestingly, in this story Nicodemus doesn't ask Jesus a question. He's making an observation. Nicodemus has *seen* something and has come to tell Jesus: “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.” Nicodemus has witnessed the power and presence of the Spirit of God in the living, human being that is Jesus. “You have something, Jesus. Something the rest of us don't have.” And if we keep reading into it, we can imagine Nicodemus saying, “I'd like some of that power and presence. I want some of that aliveness. How do I get it?”

And Jesus responds by saying that in order to *see* God's Kingdom, one has to be born “from above.” Or, one has to be born of the spirit. In other words, God's power and presence are already here, alive and active. But we won't *see*, we won't be able to *recognize* it if we only live out of our flesh, if we only claim our physical being and identity. But when the breath of CREATOR is breathing in us, we are *living beings*. And as living beings, our eyes *will see* God's Spirit at work in the world.

There may be some persons who willfully reject God's breath of life...but I think it's more likely that we *forget*. We forget to breathe. Or we are unaware of breath and spirit. We are unconscious or forget that it is God's Spirit of life breathing into us. We get caught up in the physicality of our lives, in the things we can touch and make and do and control. But God's breath of life...the wind of God...it isn't ours. It doesn't stay with us. We don't know where it comes from and where it's going. We can't hold it or control it or even understand it. And so, over time, we forget. We forget to look and listen. And our capacity to see and

hear the Spirit of God diminishes. God's Spirit, God's Wind blows where it will. Sometimes as a gentle, guiding breeze. Sometimes as a storm. If we have forgotten that we are flesh *and* spirit, we are likely to completely miss that God's Spirit is coming to us. And rather than facing into it, rather than breathing in and receiving, we turn away. *Pause. Is it possible that God's Wind is blowing within this pandemic? In our meeting in this virtual space rather than a physical space? What might happen if we turn into the events as they are, breathing in God's Breath of life?...*

When we forget that we are born of spirit and live instead trusting only that which is flesh, only trusting the physical, we lose the fullness of our humanity. We lose our capacity to see the Kingdom of God that is *already in the world*. It leaves us dis-membered. Dis-membered from our full...our complete humanity. And dis-membered from our place within the body of humanity. It leaves us fragmented. And alone.

When we find ourselves feeling broken and alone, it is likely we have forgotten that we are born of spirit. When we've forgotten that we are flesh *and* spirit, we also forget that we can trust Spirit. That we can rely on the Wind of God that blows in the world. When we only trust the flesh, the physical, what we can touch and control and know and understand, our tendency to *dis-trust* grows. If I don't see it, I don't trust it. If I don't understand it, I don't trust it. This is true for circumstances but it's also true in our relationships. When I am operating only out of my physicality, only out of my capacity to touch and know and understand and inform and control, then I am much more likely to distrust others. If I don't understand what you are doing or why you're doing what you're doing, I distrust you. I judge you. I protect myself from you. I'm likely to divide the world into *us*, the people I trust, those who are like me...and *them*, those I don't understand and who are not like me.

In Jesus' and Nicodemus' conversation, Jesus talks a lot about trust. "If I told you about earthly things...physical, flesh things...and you don't trust, how will you trust if I tell you heavenly...spirit, breath, wind things"?

The realities of the Kingdom of God are the realities of physical *and* spiritual things, of things we can know and plan and control...and things that we cannot know or plan for or control. The reality in God's Kingdom includes our bodies *and* it includes breath and spirit. It includes that which is elusive...that which can't be seen or held or touched...but is absolutely present and sure and real. Breath and spirit is the life and aliveness that connects us, as living beings, to the aliveness of each other and to all life. Can we imagine and see ourselves as part of a larger body and being? Can we trust that Spirit is breathing into us collectively...with a breath...with a wind that we cannot know or control? Are we willing to live as spirited beings?

What is born of flesh is flesh. We are born into particular families on particular land with particular physical characteristics. As physical beings we have ethnicities and religions and politics and all kinds of other things. These particularities and differences make for a beautiful and wild variety of humanity. But in all the differences, what is the same in each of our birth experiences is that CREATOR has breathed life into us. Our flesh-ed bodies and beings have more differences than we can begin to imagine. But our spirit-ed beings are one.

This is hard to trust. But Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus is also a conversation with us. And he's reminding us that we are flesh *and* spirit. Like Jesus, we are flesh and spirit. We aren't meant to be alone and separate from each other. We are meant to breathe together, to belong to the body of humanity, part of the body of creation, knowing, trusting the wind of God to breathe life into all of us. We are fully alive and fully human when we face into the wind of God, trusting God's life-giving breath.

May we live into the fullness of our humanity, as people born of flesh and born of spirit.

May we live, turning ourselves to face into the Wind of the Spirit.

And may we live, inhaling, receiving God's breath of life.

May it be so.