

“Blowing in the Wind”

John 3:1-16

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Barbara Brown Taylor once told a story about a woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. First, she read everything she could get her hands on – history, philosophy, psychology, religion. While she became very smart, nothing gave her the answer. She went to lectures and met with people and had long, wonderful conversations but from each, she received different answers. So she finally put all of her possessions in storage and went to far off places to find the meaning of life – she went to Africa, India, South America and along the way, she heard about a man who could help her. She learned that he lived deep in the Himalayas, up on the side of a mountain.

She went and climbed up the mountain and finally reached his small hut. She knocked on the door and when the man opened it, she said, “I have come half way around the world to ask you one question. What is the meaning of life?” “Please come in and have some tea,” the man said. She resisted and said that she didn’t want tea, she wanted an answer. He insisted and she gave up and sat down.

As he was brewing the tea, she started to tell him about all of the places she’d seen and the people she’d met and the books she’d read. While she was telling him all of this, he finally put a cup in her hand and started to pour. She was so busy talking that she didn’t notice when the cup was full, so the man kept pouring the tea, until it rolled over the edge of the cup and spilled on her. “What are you doing?” she yelled as the tea burned her hand. “It’s full, can’t you see that? Stop. There’s no more room.”

“Just so” the man told her. “You’ve come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There’s no more room in your cup. Come back when it’s empty and we’ll talk.”¹

By the time that Nicodemus approaches Jesus in our Gospel reading for today, he had spent his life filling his cup - learning, reading, watching. The Gospel describes Nicodemus as a well learned man, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews. This is no small title. In many ways the Pharisees were the best and most respected people in the country. There were never more than 6,000 of them and, known as a “*chaburah*” or brotherhood, they devoted themselves to the Jewish Law. The Law was perfect and all they needed to know resided there so they spent their lives knowing every detail.²

We also know that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin – seventy members who made up the “supreme court of the Jewish people.” They had religious jurisdiction over every Jew in the world and it would have been their responsibility to examine and deal with anyone suspected of being a false prophet. Nicodemus was smart, he was wealthy, he was powerful, he was well educated. So when he comes to Jesus in the dark of the night, he was carrying with him all he knew - what he had seen. “Rabbi,” he says to Jesus, “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.”³

So, Jesus invites him in – offers him the possibilities. He says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.” Now, Jesus is intentional with this statement. The original Greek term that we read as “from above” is *anothen* – it actually has two meanings held together simultaneously and it has no English equivalent. It means (at the same time) both “from above” and “again” – held together in one word. Without an equivalent in English, Bible translators have to make an editorial (and theological) decision: It’s “either...or.” The NRSV chose to translate it as “from above,” (a spatial term) while the NIV chose to translate it “again” (a temporal understanding). Same word held together in Greek – but when translated to English – half the meaning.

When Nicodemus hears Jesus’ words, even in the Greek, he seems to make an editorial (and theological) decision of his own through his knowledge about the birthing process. “How can anyone be born again after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Stuck in his worldview, Nicodemus’ cup was full. There was no room. Jesus’ teaching was illogical, irrational, flat-out impossible.⁴

It wasn’t that Nicodemus lacked desire. He had come to Jesus at night and considered Jesus a great Rabbi, a “teacher.” He had questions that he wanted Jesus to answer. “How,” Jesus, “How can this be?” But Nicodemus’ was stuck by the only way that he understood for life to begin - by the flesh. As far as he knew, to receive new life – as a grown man was an impossibility. So Jesus tells him to release his grip - let go of what he had seen and understood as the only source of life, so that he might be open to receive a new source of life - a source he could no more see (or understand or control) than he could the wind. “Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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 born of the Spirit.”

Kyle Zimmer was a lawyer in Washington DC, who (in the 90’s) found the time to volunteer for a local soup kitchen to tutor young kids in need. From the beginning of her experience she felt the energy of the kids who were coming to her for what she saw as “all the right reasons:” to get off the dangerous streets, to seek adult intervention – and sensing how these winds blew, she was able to imagine how powerful that time would be if the kids had access to more books. So Zimmer leaves her lucrative job and starts a non-profit organization called “*First Book*,” that provides books to outreach organizations and Title One schools. This past week, *The New York Times* interviewed her about *First Book* and at one point in the interview, she was asked how she built an organization to constantly meets new and different challenges.

What I found interesting was how she spoke about who she invites into the leadership roles. She said that she doesn’t tend to hire those who had been powerful bosses somewhere else – not that they don’t have a wealth of experience or knowledge – but they tend to be those not used to having their ideas kicked around – their worldview challenged, not as open to the possibility of something new, inventive, something beyond what has worked in the past.⁵ She said that she always wanted to hire people who have tried and failed and risen above it. Those who have struggled (she believes)

are the ones who are least protective of their ideas. They tend to be the most collaborative, more open to new ideas, humble, less defensive about their way of seeing the world and more willing to learn from others. In other words, they're the ones who come with their cups empty, waiting to be filled.

In the scripture passage, Jesus is challenging Nicodemus' worldview, kicking his ideas around, trying to open him up to the possibility that there is more to receive if he is open to what lies beyond what he can see. It's a source of life that he can never explain, understand or domesticate, but only experience. Jesus didn't promise Nicodemus eternal life if he believed him. He promised the Kingdom if Nicodemus believed in him. This is more than an intellectual endeavor. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to trust him. A radical rebirth that sees impossibilities as possibilities – like a love so great and wide, that God would turn toward the whole world (everyone) by offering his only son. But, “How can these things be?”

Today is Teacher Appreciation Sunday. A time when we give thanks to God for the teachers and leaders of the educational ministry of this church – for the people who have offered their time and gifts to continue the process of listening, of reimagining what God is calling us to be through Christian education.

The goal of Christian education is not simply to relay information, to tick off facts, listing all that we know and all we have seen. This, after all, ultimately speaks to the past – what we have already learned, who we have already been. That's only half of the story and to interpret it only that way would be a tragic editorial and theological decision. Instead, the ultimate goal of Christian Education is to create a space where we can listen for the Spirit wherever and whenever it (by grace) turns itself to us, so that we might respond faithfully by turning ourselves to the world, however illogical, irrational, impossible it may seem. And that happens just about everywhere – in worship, in the classrooms, in fellowship, in mission, anytime we've tried and failed and (by grace) been lifted above it. When we are open to new ideas, humble, less defensive about our way of seeing the world and more willing to learn. In other words, when we come with our cups empty, trusting that God will fill them up.

As this church moves through the transition from what was to what will be, there are (as always) unknowns that challenge that trust. What is God calling this ministry to be “in the heart of Charlotte”? What does that mean in this time and place? What role will a new leader take? Are we willing to risk it all for the sake of the gospel? Is our imagination limited to what we have already seen and heard and been, or are we truly open to being subject to the mysterious God who gives birth to newness? Is it irresponsible, illogical, irrational, flat-out impossible? It was for Nicodemus. But is it for us?

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. “Stay for Tea, Nicodemus.” *Christian Century*; 2/21/96, Vol. 113 Issue 6, p195 .

² See William Barclay's, *The Gospel of John, Vol 1 (Chapters 1 to 7)*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press. © 1955. P108-113.

³ John 3:2 (all references are from the NRSV translation, unless otherwise noted.)

⁴ William Barclay's, *The Gospel of John, Vol 1 (Chapters 1 to 7)*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press. © 1955. p. 114. Barclay astutely points out that this was not a simple misunderstanding but (considering his obvious longing) a worldview he couldn't accept as possible.

⁵ Bryant, Adam. “So Your Idea Hit a Brick Wall. Congratulations!” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2012.