

2 Lent Year A
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Trinity Episcopal Parish
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Becoming Ourselves

Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17; John 3: 1-17

As a typical starving artist, my father always bought the finest oil paints, even if it meant going without life's necessities. With my child's eyes big as saucers, I'd watch him squeeze a tiny mound from each tube onto his palette, as he prepared to create his next masterpiece. The colors were magnificent; he had everything he needed to paint the perfect picture – everything, except *faith*, and a *lot of hard work*.

He'd start with an act of faith – that somewhere in all the possibilities of color and canvas and subject matter, there was a wonderfully unique picture waiting to be born. Then he moved on to the hard work – the sweat, the persistence, the slides into despair as he lost all sense of where it was going; and then the bursts of resurrected hope as his vision cleared again – all essential parts of incarnating that unique image the artist works to liberate from just under the canvas. As he struggled, Dad often said, "*You know Paul, creativity is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.*"

Without realizing it, he was articulating the spark that ignited the Protestant Reformation in 16th century Europe. On one side, the traditional Catholic view that we're saved by our perspiration, our *works*. That's why priests sold indulgences, promises to pray the souls of loved ones from the punishment of Purgatory. And with that practice came tremendous corruption.

On the other side were the Reformers, loosely called Protestants, quoting Paul's Letter to the Romans we just heard, insisting we were saved – or what they called *justified* – not by our works, but *sola fide*, only by our *faith*. Soon, people started killing each other over their positions. Welcome to the dark underbelly of religion.

Thanks be to God, along came Anglicanism. Both Catholic *and* Reformed, our Anglican tradition asserted that each side had *part* of the truth, but not *all* of the truth. This is how the *via media*, the "middle way" of Anglicanism, has always worked – insisting that truth is usually found in competing sides of the same issue, in *faith* in Jesus, *and* in *working* to follow Christ. Since God is bigger than any of our theological certainties, Anglicans encourage us to think in terms of "both / and," instead of "either / or." That's why Episcopalians are the only denomination who refuse to be called "Protestant" or "Catholic," because we are both.

Both "faith" and "works." Saint Augustine put it well, whenever the priest elevated the host at the moment of consecration. "*Behold what you are,*" he'd say, and "*become what you see.*" "*Behold what you are,*" a beloved child of God, and "*become what you see,*" act like it!

In today's gospel we meet Nicodemus, powerful, rich, successful – a brilliant religious leader, and master teacher. With everything going for him, why was he so up tight that he

came to Jesus in *secret*, at night? Like most of us, he was hungry for something deeper, but afraid of what it might cost.

In his fear, Nicodemus fell back on what he knew – his head, not his heart. Moved by Jesus' amazing miracles, he wastes Jesus' time by going all literal on us, "*How can I be born again if I'm old? Am I supposed to crawl back into my mother's womb?*"

Nicodemus reminds me so much of *us*, hungering for something deeper. As St. Augustine put it, "*God, you have formed us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*" So we cast about for answers, stumble upon Jesus' invitation – and then have no idea what to do with it. We want to settle for a simple affirmation of *faith*; but deep down, we understand Jesus calls us to the *hard work* of transforming our lives and our world.

That's why Jesus says it's not enough to be "*born of water,*" as in baptism. We must also be "*born of the Holy Spirit,*" which only happens when we do the hard work, every day, of opening our hearts to God's love, and then realizing that God's love is intended for every member of the human family, not just our family or friends, but the *whole* human family, *equally*. In God's economy there is no Greek or Jew, male or female, rich or poor, Muslim or Christian, gay, transgender or straight, refugee or real American. No country comes first, because *people, all of God's people – the human family* – comes first.

I believe the greatest moral challenge we face today is the attempt to re – define community in our own narrow self – image, rather than God's family – the entire human community. That's the root cause of poverty, war, oppression, of all social sin. Having *faith this is true, and then acting on that faith*, is God's claim on each of us. And our choice is to accept it or, like Nicodemus, to ignore what's going on all around us, and walk away.

One of my students at Yale told me this week that she was giving up self – criticism for Lent. The more she watched her thinking and the self – deprecating jokes she made about herself, she realized that for her, this was the key to change. What if you and I decided to give up all judgment of others for Lent, all the ways we think or act like we are smarter, more developed, more morally correct, more deserving, more valuable than some other group of God's people; and left those judgments to the one whose job it is to make them – God? How would our lives change? How would the world around us change?

Thankfully, God has already given each of us everything we need for this journey of both faith and action. As Jesus reminds us, "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that every one who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.*" We have the perfect role model in Jesus, and we have each other, wonderfully imperfect, to remind us to *believe*, and then to *act* on those beliefs. So as we approach the table, let's each commit to embracing God's invitation, "*Behold what you are... become what you see.*"