

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 2/17/08
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: John 3:1-17

Last weekend, I was in Baltimore with one of my best friends, celebrating her 60th birthday. We spent most of an afternoon at the American Visionary Art Museum, where a year-long exhibition entitled, “All Faiths Beautiful: Respect for Diversity of Belief” is running. Artists from a multitude of faith traditions have expressed their belief, or lack thereof, or aspects of their journey of faith through various media. I highly recommend a visit. The paintings, collages, sculptures, tapestries, and DVDs that were collected and shared are beautiful, informative, and inspiring.

But for me, the most meaningful part of this exhibit was something called “PostSecrets” – an ongoing work by an artist named Frank Warren. In 2004, Mr. Warren handed out three thousand blank postcards on the streets of Washington, D.C. that were stamped and addressed to a post office box in Germantown, Maryland. He invited every person who took a card to anonymously share something about his or her deeply personal hopes, fears, or desires. Mr. Warren was amazed to begin receiving postcards that not only told the secrets of those who participated, but often did so using original artwork. After a time, Mr. Warren stopped handing out those blank postcards, but people heard about the project and mailed in their own. He continues to receive about a thousand postcards a week from all over the world.

Included in the “All Faiths Beautiful” exhibit was a selection of these postcards that dealt specifically with secrets related to people’s lives of faith. Some were funny. Over a copy of a pledge card, someone wrote, “I always overpay my tithe. It’s my feeble attempt to make up for constantly screwing up the other areas of my life.” On another postcard, in between drawn images of an angel and the devil, was printed, “I was so lonely I asked both God and Satan to send me someone. Now that you’re here, I don’t who to thank.” On a postcard with a drawing of four nuns – three standing upright and one prone – was this note: “I would have liked to have been a nun, but I really like to sleep late.”

Other anonymously-shared secrets on postcards about faith and belief were sad, poignant, and painful. On the beams of a simple drawing of a cross were these words: “I am a Southern Baptist pastor’s wife. No one knows I do not believe in God.” Underneath a picture of an ambulance, someone else wrote, “My grandpa always told me to pray for the people in ambulances, but the time that it mattered most to me, they couldn’t save him.” Another person’s postcard said, “The fear of going to hell is the one thing that keeps me alive.”

I wonder what Nicodemus would have written on a postcard, had he been given the opportunity to mail one in to the PostSecrets project. In today’s story from the Gospel of John, Nicodemus is identified as a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews. That would have made him a respected member of the religious establishment, well-off, from a good family, and wielding some power - though limited, given the Roman occupation. To most people he probably would have looked like someone who had it all. And yet, something must have

been missing, because he comes to Jesus alone, at night, under the cover of darkness. Nicodemus – a man utterly steeped and invested in the religious system of his day – sees something in Jesus that is clearly of God; something that doesn't seem to be defined by the rules of the system that Nicodemus has been carefully following. I wonder whether Nicodemus might have been experiencing a new and deep yearning for God, recognizing in Jesus someone who was clearly near to God and full of God's spirit; someone whose every word and action reflected utter trust in God's nearness. Maybe Nicodemus sought out Jesus to try to find out how he, Nicodemus, could be very near to God, too.

In his conversation with Nicodemus in this story, Jesus uses the image of birth as a metaphor for an encounter with God. Think about the purely physical aspect of birth: it's being delivered or released from a tight, confined space into an expansive one. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that when Jesus is speaking with Nicodemus about being born from above, or born again, or born of the Spirit, he means that in relationship with God, we're set free; it's like being let out of a locked closet. We're saved from what's killing us, and we're given new life.*

“How can these things be?” asks Nicodemus. And that's the last we hear of him in this story. The author of the Gospel goes on to describe what he and his community remember and proclaim about the person and work of Jesus: That God's intention is that through Jesus, the world might be saved; that in giving our heart to Jesus, we are given the gift of new life. But we don't know if Nicodemus shared with Jesus the secrets he might have been carrying. We don't know if he stole away from his night-time meeting with Jesus unmoved and unchanged, or whether that encounter was the catalyst for a process of rebirth – a journey from death to new life.

During this season of Lent, we're invited to look carefully at our lives – to honor our longing for God, and to name the secrets that we might be too afraid to admit to ourselves, let alone anyone else. During these days and weeks of reflection and introspection, we have an opportunity to identify what's killing us; to consider what's keeping us from full, vibrant communion with God and the new life that that brings. Have we been frantically trying to keep up appearances, when, in fact, everything in our life seems to be falling apart? Are we in the terrifying grip of addiction? Are serious financial struggles eroding our self-esteem and our closest relationships? Is there something that we've done that we believe cannot be forgiven? Have we lost our faith as we've known it? Do we question what our purpose in this life could possibly be?

Admitting to ourselves and to God the truth about the way things really are is the first step in the dynamic process of transformation and rebirth. In owning that truth, we make way for a glimmer of hope that the way things are now are not the way that things will always be. Just that little bit of hope may help us remember and recognize those things that do give us life. The mysterious strength that God offers those who ask for it begins to lessen the weight of the burden we've been carrying. The community of faith sustains us as we seek to center ourselves, again, in God, sinking into God's limitless forgiveness and compassion.

And through it all blows the gentle wind of God's Spirit, reminding us that there is absolutely nowhere that we can go and absolutely nothing that we can do that can separate us from the abundant, ever-present love of God. Amen.

* Insights that Barbara Brown Taylor shared at a conference called "January Adventure," held at St. Simon's Island, Georgia, in January 2007 have informed this sermon.