Born Again into Deeper Relationships

March 5, 2023 Lent II

John 3: 1-17

On Thursday for our Courageous Faith session, we heard from [Roberto Che Espinoza](https://robertoche.com/), an activist theologian, trans man, who works to transform churches and communities from supremacy culture to deeper connection and relationship. He talked about the importance of the church to live out class solidarity, which he described as making a place for the poor and disenfranchised in our church and community. It means paying attention to poverty and houselessness. We develop and live out solidarity from a place of relationship and he challenged us to develop a deep sense of connection with one another. He asks: how does our perception of people change when we develop and are in deep relationship with them? How did Nicodemus change as Jesus sought to develop a deeper connection with him through challenging him to think and live differently?

In the gospel reading today, Jesus is inviting Nicodemus into a deeper connection, a deeper relationship, not only with him but with God and all people. That is the focus for Jesus of being born again or born from above. The word used here, actually has two meanings: both born again or born anew, and born from above or born of the Spirit. Many biblical scholars say the translations of the Bible should use both definitions to help us understand Jesus’ message better. Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, that he needs to be born anew, or born of the spirit, which means having a deeper relationship with God and one another. Nicodemus is a pharisee, and comes to see Jesus under the cover of night, so he is not seen by other Pharisees. He is curious about Jesus, and does see him as coming from God. He believes in Jesus, but not in the way Jesus is looking for. Jesus is looking for a deeper connection, a more meaningful relationship with God. He challenges Nicodemus to move from where he is at, as a pharisee following the letter of the laws, to being born from above, connecting with the Spirit of love, and build relationship with God and loving people. Later in the gospel, Jesus also challenged those who followed him only because of the miracles they saw. It is not enough to follow because of what we see, we need a relationship with the love of God, that leads us into deeper relationship with God, and deeper connection as a result with one another, especially the poor and marginalized.

What are some of the ways we can have deeper connection with others, especially those we don’t know and those who are different from us? It is about living out being born of the Spirit, living out the love of God and seeing God in each of us. Roberto Che said, Jesus became human for us to become divine. Jesus encourages us to see love, to see God in one another. If we can do this, then we will build deeper connection with others, with the other. It is about not just giving to the poor, but engaging in conversation, getting to know their name, maybe their birthday, and some of their story. It is engaging in conversation with someone new to the church to welcome them in a way that might build deeper connection. It is engaging in conversation with someone you are volunteering with at Indigenous Christian Fellowship as you do dishes together, to share a bit of each others’ stories. It is engaging in conversation with those we don’t know at gatherings such as the Community Dinner. It is engaging in conversation with those who experience oppression of any form on a daily basis, whether it is racism, transphobia, sexism, classism, homophobia, to get a better sense of what life is like and how we can be allies, in solidarity, and create more welcoming community. All of these and more can build deeper connection with others, which is living out God’s loving spirit.

Nicodemus had this deep conversation with Jesus outside of synagogue and Sabbath services. I know most of my faith changing deep conversations and experiences happened outside of Sunday morning worship. So, as we move through these times in the church of changing culture and society, we might ask, how might we provide opportunities outside of Sunday morning for these deep conversations? There are opportunities for some of these deep conversations at Film and Faith, Community Dinner, Courageous Faith, and Open Minds Open Books study. How might we provide these opportunities on Sunday morning? Maybe it’s time to get back to having time for small group conversations like when we used the breakout rooms on Zoom during the pandemic. Roberto named that he does a lot of pastoral care through his DMs, which are the direct messages through which people contact him on social media. Through these interactions he is very conscious he is connecting with the diaspora of the church – those who no longer go to church but still have a faith or spirituality.

A few of us were talking after the annual meeting last week about how do we let people know in our community, in our neighbourhood about the things we are doing, the issues we are involved in supporting and addressing. The thinking is that if people knew what we were about, which is probably different than their assumptions, they may be interested in joining us. So, maybe we need to be more evangelical about what we offer and talk more about it. Maybe we need to take up advertising in the local community magazine, and do postcard drops of the programs we offer like Film and Faith, Community Dinner, Courageous Faith and Open Minds, Open Hearts, Open Books.

In the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, it is probably safe to say the Nicodemus was not only confused by what Jesus was telling him, but also uncomfortable. He didn’t know what it meant to be reborn, to let go of what he knew and approach living out his faith differently. Roberto Che, named that we need to live into our discomfort – the challenges of things like understanding white supremacy, letting go of how we have always done things. He said we need to see being in relationship as more important than being right or doing the ‘right’ thing, or having the right dogma. He believes we need contemplation as well as action – that contemplation, prayer and meditation, needs to inform and lead us into action. Without contemplation, he says, we get Progressive Christianity. Ouch! Those of us in the group, heard that challenge directed to us who would identify as Progressive Christians. At one point in the interview he made a reference in his book Activist Theology about Christians being a Charlatan or Revolutionary. We looked up charlatan and reminded ourselves what it meant, and it is basically someone who is a fraud or scammer. So, it would be Christians who say one thing and do another.

In the end of the interview, in responding to the question if you could tweet one message that goes viral what would it be, Espinoza responded: do we want to be a revolutionary or a charlatan? I think that is similar to what Jesus was asking Nicodemus: Do you want to continue living your life as you are, or are you willing to be born of the spirit of love and live life very differently than you presently are? We don’t know what Nicodemus decided, but there are two clues later in the gospel when he defends Jesus against the Pharisees and when he helps Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus after his death on the cross. He was taking steps to live differently and be born from above.

May we be clearer in our lives, how we want to respond to Jesus. May we be willing to engage in deep relationship with God and with others, as we seek to follow Jesus. May we find ways to let others know about what we offer, who may be interested in the ministries we offer outside of Sunday morning. May we seriously consider how we might be more revolutionary and less of a charlatan as we consider what it means to be born from above, or born again.