

Romans 8:12-17 New International Version (NIV)

12 Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. 13 For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

14 For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. 15 The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba*, Father.” 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. 17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

John 3:1-17 New International Version (NIV)

3 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

3 Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

4 “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

5 Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

10 “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? 11 Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

"He Came To Jesus at Night"
The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee
May 30, 2021

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I would like to celebrate something with you this morning. First, I want to recall to you that we are in the Season of Pentecost, marking the birth of the Church as the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples of Jesus as they gathered together in secret in the aftermath of his death. They were waiting for a resurrection, even as they lived in fear of being discovered as his followers and therefore somehow implicated in what was deemed his blasphemy and his insurrection. The Spirit came to them and they were enlivened for the work ahead of them even as they were brought together even more closely in the translational, transformational gifts of the Spirit. There is a lot to celebrate, and particularly as *we come together, in what I like to call three dimensional worship* for the first time in well over a year and also for the first time in my ministry among you. We gather here freely, to worship and to enjoy community in faith, and there is no one who asks or demands that we not do so.

Even during the worst of this pandemic we were *allowed* to gather, albeit virtually, and friends connected through the church remained in touch with one another, sharing prayers of support, and socially distant visits when possible. No one challenged us for caring about each other's spiritual needs; neither were we persecuted for naming our allegiance to one we believe guides our behavior. This freedom is a gift, and it is one that the first disciples did not have. They were a suspect lot. Imagine for a moment that I, a minister of Word and Sacrament in the United Church of Christ, wanted to learn from someone I believed had a great deal to teach me about our faith, but to do so meant that I had to sneak there, letting no one know that I was meeting. It struck me as amusing to consider last week when I reached out to a former professor of mine, having just read our Gospel lesson for today. When in our conversation he asked me what I was reading lately, I had to admit something a bit sheepishly.

When I have or can make time to read for fun, to take a break from some of the more weighty texts I *sometimes* ponder in preparing sermons, I read young adult fiction. I started to read a science fiction story this week about a family with what could be called paranormal powers. This kind of subject is all the rage in YA fiction these days. Misty Provencher's novel *Cornerstone* may not make its way into a systematic theology class, but it does raise some interesting themes. As the young woman who is the main character struggles to understand that she can do and be more than she had known of herself, she is led to her understanding by a family that embraces her and her mother. Prior to this point, she had only understood herself and her mom to be the odd ones outside of acceptable society, and she thought it was because there was something wrong with them. She probably would have described her childhood as lonely.

So, being brought into the family of friends who both protect and teach her, young Nalena knows the welcome of community for the first time. Much of our Christian faith has to do with community, even when we are not conscious of it and maybe in ways you have considered less actively. I remember learning ways of speaking about the Trinity, which as I shared in our message for the children in us, is the way we understand God as being three persons in unity. Because God exists in community within God-self, Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit, we can understand the unity into which Jesus calls us. This morning's scripture lessons introduce us to a way of understanding how we get to this place of communion in faith in Jesus. It isn't only Nicodemus who needs some explanation, I'm sure.

Our bodies are a gift, but can be a burden if we exist only for the body. Nicodemus is so stuck with the idea that his existence is tied only to his body, that he thinks Jesus tells him he must somehow be physically born again through his earthly mother to achieve what Jesus hopes to share with him. No way. As Paul also makes clear, the change in us for a life of faith is to move from a focus on the body, meeting its needs and desires, and instead to live a life of Spirit. To do so allows us to follow Jesus where He would have us go, rather than to be tempted to follow our bodies where they would have us go. This doesn't only mean that when we live outside of the Spirit we yield to carnal desires, although that is certainly an

emphasis for Paul. Rather, to live in the body keeps us from connecting to one another in true unity of Spirit, which comes from God. I begin to think of living in the flesh as something like the skin we're in separating us from others.

We all understand separation too well, I am sure, and I don't only mean what we have been experiencing with Covid-19. Sometimes geography gets in the way of our connecting with persons with whom we are in relationship. Sometimes it is race that separates us from others with whom we COULD be in relationship. Sometimes it is a set of beliefs to which we hold more firmly than to loving acceptance of someone other than ourself. Separations and distinctions are real, and are not of the Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit at Pentecost and those gifts continuing in and through us even now are the greater part of life. Paul spells them out for us in other letters. They are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. What is of God enables our unity, and without a sense of unity with others in the Spirit, life is, well, more than difficult. The author I've been reading, Misty Provencher, reflects on this in a way that sounds a lot like the way John Milton described Hell in his *Paradise Lost*, though certainly not as beautifully poetically. She writes, "Spiritual isolation is hell. It's not a physical place. It's complete separation from everyone else. Total loneliness. At that point, unless a person can reach back out and find use for relationships again, they go insane."

It is into relationship that Jesus calls us--in a way that, ideally, replicates the community that exists within God—seamless, separationless. I am *really* looking forward to our celebrating Communion together next week. When we break bread with others as Jesus asks us, remembering that he is present in those moments, we welcome the Spirit. We turn off the skin we're in separations, and welcome each other into the space Jesus provides, which is timeless, limitless, and painless. Though I regret that I didn't have room in my schedule in seminary to study Greek, I remain grateful for the several terms I learned in the context of other study. *Perichoresis* is my favorite Greek word, meaning "mutual indwelling." I have come to understand the depth of this kind of loving in a couple of ways that may help you also to make sense of it so that you will not be moved to say "it's all Greek to me." Moving in relationship with another in the way of mutual

indwelling is like watching a movie and laughing at something not because you find it particularly amusing, but because you know that your daughter, or your husband or your friend would. We feel for one another when we live in love. We also make space for one another, and here I would like to read a bit from a wonderful little book I also recommend to you, Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea*. I being at page 98 in the chapter named for the shell Argonauta.

A good relationship has a pattern like a dance and is built on some of the same rules. The partners do not need to hold on tightly, because they move confidently in the same pattern, intricate but gay and swift and free, like a country dance of Mozart's. To touch heavily would be to arrest the pattern and freeze the movement, to check the endlessly changing beauty of its unfolding. There is no place here for the possessive clutch, the clinging arm, the heavy hand, only the barest touch in passing. Now arm in arm, now face to face, now back to back—it does not matter which. Because they know they are partners moving to the same rhythm, creating a pattern together, and being invisibly nourished by it.

The joy of such a pattern is not only the joy of creation or the joy of participation, it is also the joy of living in the moment. Lightness of touch and living in the moment are intertwined. One cannot dance well unless one is completely in time with the music, not leaning back to the last step or pressing forward to the next one, but poised directly on the present step as it comes. Perfect poise on the beat is what gives good dancing its sense of ease, of timelessness, of the eternal. It is what Blake was speaking of when he wrote: '*He who bends to himself a joy/Doth the winged life destroy,/But he who kisses the joy as it flies/Lives in Eternity's sunrise.*' The dancers who are perfectly in time never destroy 'the winged life' in each other or in themselves."

Community in and through Jesus is the community of love that he began to build with his disciples, and which we are called to build, in love and acceptance of all others. Looking forward in what feels again—or anew—like a true gift of gathering together as church, there is so much that we can celebrate as we grow into the Body of Christ, creating the reign of God. So, I invite you to make time to build relationships in our community of faith. Let's discover what makes each other laugh, or cry, or get excited, or even get angry. What invigorates our activity as we seek to love our neighbors well, and particularly those who are suffering? Doesn't this kind of community of mutual indwelling sound like a slice of heaven? A corner of God's realm? And wouldn't that reflect God's glory? Life born again in

the Spirit is life in community, a gift from God. May we build and recognize it here, giving thanks to God for this great gift. Amen.