

'REDISCOVER JESUS: 'UPSIDE DOWN'

What do you want from Jesus?

We know, or at the very least are able to echo what Jesus wants from us: a close and intimate relationship that allows his light to shine through us.

Like I said, we can get pretty close to echoing that refrain.

But what about you? What do you want from Jesus?

Matthew Kelly, the author of our Lenten devotional, 'Rediscover Jesus', I think hits on something quite true and ultimately very profound: regardless of how we may particularly answer the question of what do we want from Jesus (because each of our responses will be as unique as the people declaring it), the reality is that most of us do not want what Jesus wants us to want (and yes, that sentence does make sense...might not be overly articulate...but it does make sense!). We do not want, as the Psalmist cries out, 'a new and right Spirit within us'; we do not want to be transformed...we want to be tweaked, buffed out around the edges so that we shine a little more, without all of the messiness that comes from a full scale transformative rehab.

But is a little tweaking, you know, here and there, around the edges of our life, is that enough to embolden us to want what Jesus wants us to want?

Are any of you going to be shocked that for a ridiculously large majority of all people, everywhere and through all time, that the answer is 'no'?

I didn't think you would be...which is good, because that means that some of the tweaking that has taken place in the midst of your life has left a God reflected mark.

But we should not fall into a space of sinful contentment that that little reflection from a modicum of tweaking is all that God has in mind for any of us.

So how do we move from a place of being content with a very little in terms of what we want from Jesus, to being open to having our lives turned upside down, where we cry out with sincerity, 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.', and not just for right now, but from now on?

Scripture is filled with examples of people who turn, seemingly on a dime, to follow Jesus lock, stock, and barrel. I don't know about you, but as much as I marvel at those examples, I can't relate to them, because as much as I believe, and I do, their story seems...unbelievable. I'm not saying it's not true. What I am saying is that I have struggled to see their story in my life.

Which is why I am grateful the example of Nicodemus. Nicodemus makes several appearances through the Gospel of John and what we are able to see is transformation on a glacial scale: the change might not be fast, but it's deep and inalterable. Nicodemus opened himself up to God, he knocked on that door, and he became open to the leading from God to close the gap between where he was and where he ended up in his faith walk.

Begin to hear the story of Nicodemus' upside down transformation again. As you do, I invite you to offer a prayer with me. Let us pray: Create in us a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within us. (Psalm 51:10) Lord, let it be so.

John 3:1-11

3Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, 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.' ³Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' ⁴Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' ⁵Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." ⁸The 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 who is born of the Spirit.'

⁹Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' ¹⁰Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen;

John 7:37-52

Intro

Nicodemus went to Jesus under the cover of darkness and he spoke to Jesus about what he knew...and he began to be confronted with the reality that what he knew, was not the truth of God, certainly not the totality.

Jesus continues to declare the truth of God and those declarations put him in the crosshairs of the religious leadership...of which Nicodemus was a part. Listen and what you will hear is the continuation of the upside down transformation. The scripture reads this way.

John 7:37-52

³⁷ On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, ³⁸and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." ' ³⁹Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

⁴⁰ When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, 'This is really the prophet.' ⁴¹Others said, 'This is the Messiah.' But some asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? ⁴²Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?' ⁴³So there was a division in the crowd because of him. ⁴⁴Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

⁴⁵ Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, 'Why did you not arrest him?' ⁴⁶The police answered, 'Never has anyone spoken like this!' ⁴⁷Then the Pharisees replied, 'Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? ⁴⁸Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? ⁴⁹But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed.' ⁵⁰Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, ⁵¹'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?' ⁵²They replied,

‘Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.’

John 19:38-42

Intro

We are able to behold the next step of the transformation toward the end of John. It is there that Nicodemus, the religious and social leader of his people, comes out into the light of a rapidly ending day to care for the body of a crucified Jesus.

How did he first come to Jesus? Under the cover of darkness.

When do we hear about last? As Jesus’ body is prepared for burial.

How do we know that his life was turned upside down by God forevermore?

Because we know his name. The life altering, God-directed transformation of Nicodemus was so complete that his name meant something remarkably positive to the people of the early church. If it didn’t, we wouldn’t receive another glimpse into how complete that transformation was. The scripture reads this way.

John 19:38-42

38 After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴²And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

‘Rediscover Jesus: Upside Down’

Jesus turned Nicodemus’ life upside down. From their opening conversation about needing to be born of the Spirit, Nicodemus was transformed...and it didn’t happen overnight.

Thank God!

Thank God for a Biblical example that is able to show the faith-filled doubt and concern that so many of us can so relate to.

But this conversation is not so much about finding someone to relate to, as it is following the emblematic example that we have before us. Nicodemus started from a place of faith-filled doubt and was led to a place where he traversed the gap created by that doubt by following through on the faithful living that Jesus invites all people to discover.

That gap, that separation, is what leaves us wanting to be tweaked and not flipped upside down so that we might be able to be fully transformed. When we stay in that place we are able to see the truth of God's presence...but we are not able to trust that the promises that are made in scripture actually pertain to us.

Do you live in that emotional and spiritual place?

If you do and you can feel that leading inside you that there is more (and there is), then I invite you to be like Nicodemus and seek Jesus out, even if it's under the proverbial cover of darkness and accept the invitation that has been there all along: to abide in him.

How do I do that, you ask?

Well, the reality is that the answer will be unique for all of us, but there are going to be some similarities that still carry through.

First off, we need to read the scriptures. The reality is that if we don't know who God is, then we can be led astray, either by our own bias or ignorance, or by those who speak from their bias or ignorance.

I know, I know: here's a minister saying that we need to read the Bible again...shocking!

But could it be that maybe there is real wisdom in actually allowing these words to become more than just words that someone says occasionally?

Let me ask it to you in this way: what are you going to know better, something that you have studied or something that you haven't? I am not saying that God is a math equation, or a science experiment, but the reality is, much like the learning of a foreign language, that the best way to learn it is to immerse yourself in it. The best way to abide in God is to know where and how He longs for us to abide with Him.

Look, we can be really smart people, but that doesn't mean that we are going to inherently know and understand who God is and who he would have us become. Sometimes it's the really smart people who struggle the most in actually trusting Jesus.

But if we allow ourselves the opportunity to embrace and be embraced by God through the scriptures, how much more likely are we trust in Him when we really need it? Pick one of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) and set apart a dedicated amount of time each day. It may feel like a square peg in a round hole for a while...until you start to realize that these patterns of living that once felt like someone else's, now feel like your own.

Remember, Nicodemus did not just snap into a life that exhibited faithfulness in the message spoken by Jesus Christ: he grew into it by faithfully abiding with the God in whom he trusted. Knock on that door, live into that way of living.

Secondly, prayer.

And all of the people in the pews think, 'what a shock: the minister guy is pulling out all the familiar refrains'.

Again, here's the reality: the ideas that are put out there to bridge the gap between ourselves and God are not (and for that matter should not) sound all that revolutionary. If we have been responding to the whisper of God's Spirit to believe in any way, then 'the what' we need to do is going to be articulated in very similar ways through the course of our life.

The question is whether or not we will, and as all of us know, there are countless numbers of things that will pull us away from setting aside the time on a daily basis to deepen our relationship with the Creator of all through prayer. In a few days the author of our Lenten devotional 'Rediscover Jesus' will provide us a process to engage or as the case may be, reengage God through prayer. Look at it. Prayer about it. Try it. Or don't.

But if you don't, then begin to implement patterns that allow you to open yourself up to a life of prayer...in some way. Much like diets, everything will not work for everyone. But when you find that right way that works for you, that can make all the difference in the world. The Son of Man is inviting us to communicate with him on a regular (which will ultimately grow into an unending) basis. We've got to start sometime. Commit to starting today and stick with it for the rest of Lent (that's three weeks).

Again, Nicodemus did not just snap into a life that exhibited faithfulness in the message spoken by Jesus Christ: he grew into it by faithfully abiding with the God in whom he trusted. Knock on that door, live into that way of living.

If we do those two steps we have already begun to embrace a third step of bridging the gap which is denying yourself. Our culture does a remarkable job of finding new ways to expedite self-gratification...which is in direct opposition to the Son of Man who calls for us to deny ourselves and pick up our cross and follow him (Luke 9:23). Do you think that Nicodemus was excited about the prospects of coming out to the world as someone who sympathized with (and ultimately believed in) Jesus?

Of course not!

But he denied his wants and in doing so was able to walk all the more closely with the God who had blessed him with faith in the first place, and here we are 2000 years later, looking to him as a model of someone who grew into their faithfulness.

We too need to deny ourselves so that we might be bettered, so that our family might be benefitted, so that the world around us might be cared for (which is what we're supposed to be doing anyway as the stewards that we are called to be). Deny yourself...and begin to grow closer to become your best you.

What do you want from Jesus? Because Jesus wants to turn your life upside down

What do you want from Jesus? What was the prayer that we offered as we began our conversation this morning?

'Create in us a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within us.' (Psalm 51:10).

Well, most of us are like Nicodemus which means that new and right spirit isn't going to show up overnight. It will grow into being as we abide with God through His Word, in prayer, and in denying self. Knock on that door and begin to grow into your best you, the you who abides in the Son of Man.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy God, we thank You for Nicodemus who reminds us that we can grow into our faith by faithfully walking with You. God, flip us upside down so that we might be able to live into our faith through faithful living. Help us to know You, communicate with You, and deny ourselves so that Your name might be glorified. God the gap between ourselves and You can be traversed as we trust and trust and trust again...in You. Lord, create in us a clean heart and put a new and right Spirit within us. Lord, let it be so...and let it begin today. Amen.