

## UNIQUE WAYS

### John 3:1-17

#### Intro

Nicodemus was a man who was known. He was known by his family, by his peers, by the greater community of Jerusalem. But, not only was he known he was respected, he was respected as someone who loved God and who did a good job of leading the people of his country to follow that God. Clearly, he appreciated this fact. I don't say that in a bad way. But it is absolutely a part of our story this morning.

Why I say this is because of the fact that when he has questions for the teacher from Nazareth, he doesn't walk up to the man in the public square like a neighbor and begin a conversation. He knew the politics surrounding Jesus and he knew that those politics would only frown upon the sorts of questions that he was going to ask.

So, being a person of influence, he sends one of trusted surrogates to arrange a private meeting,...that would take place under the cover of darkness,... in the middle of the night.

Can you see him? Walking through Jerusalem in the most non-descript clothes that he could wear, wanting to make sure that no one would take any sort of second notice? Can you see him?

How many of us are so very similar? We may not think of ourselves participating in such cloak and dagger activities, but our faith and how we live that out lingers in the shadows of how the world sees us.

Jesus spoke with Nicodemus in a way that let him know that he needed to be 'born again'. For us, that is a call to step out into the light in a unique way. The scripture reads this way.

### **John 3:1-17**

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He 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.' <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus 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?' <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." <sup>8</sup>The 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.'

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

<sup>11</sup> 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

### **Romans 8:12-17**

#### **Intro**

The mantle to step into and live in a unique way in the light is picked up by Paul in our second passage this morning. It shows us that the call that was offered up by Jesus to a particular individual, is a reality that is for all those who are led to cry out, 'Abba! Father!', to the Creator of all. As we look out at the world, as we look in at our lives, our willingness to follow the message of living a Spirit-filled life is needed uniquely. The scripture reads this way.

### **Romans 8:12-17**

12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—<sup>13</sup>for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. <sup>14</sup>For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. <sup>15</sup>For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' <sup>16</sup>it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup>and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

#### **'Unique Ways'**

So, sometimes the Spirit of God whispers in...unique ways.

On Tuesday afternoon, as I was trying to get my thoughts together for this morning's sermon, I was listening to a radio station when, from out of nowhere, the host said, 'have you heard about that Mr. Roger's thing that's going around the internet?' I have no idea what the context of that statement was (clearly, an enthralling program), or what was said after. But that little seed of 'Mr. Rogers' led me to type into the search bar of my web browser, 'Mr. Rogers'. Here's the first thing that I clicked on.

**Trailer of 'Won't You Be My Neighbor?':**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhwktRDG\\_aQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhwktRDG_aQ)

So, did you know that there was a Mr. Rogers movie coming out? Did you know that there are actually two movies coming out, with the second one starring Tom Hanks as Mr. Rogers? Neither did I!

But as I watched the trailer for the documentary, I couldn't help but think that the little seed that was planted through a radio talk show, was a thought that needed to be heard in the midst of this morning's conversation.

I watched that preview and I saw a person, led by the Spirit of God, to show genuine love and care for children, who was willing to speak about the realities of war, death, murder, divorce, racism, community, and disabilities. Yes, I could go to the whole religion piece and say that he was an ordained Presbyterian minister...but as we all know, those are just human expressions that may or may not speak to what is at the heart of someone.

So what did he say? How did he live? Quoting what we just heard in the trailer: 'Love is at the root of everything. All learning. All relationships. Love or the lack of it.' We also heard, 'The greatest thing we can do is to help somebody know that they are loved and capable of loving.'

I kid you not, I'm sitting there at my desk on Tuesday, watching Youtube clips of old Mr. Roger's episodes, and there are tears falling from my eyes and a lump in my throat. Some might think that's absolutely ridiculous. In the midst of that moment, and then the days that followed, I don't think that it was ridiculous at all.

Instead, I think that I was led to be able to remind us of someone, someone whom many of us remember very well, who was able to exemplify and illustrate what it means to be born again, born of the Spirit, responding to the world not out of fear but out of love (you know, the truths that the scriptures are calling us to be reminded of here this morning).

These truths are reflected remarkably well in a statement that Mr. Rogers wrote in, *Things to Remember Along the Way*. He said, 'I believe that at the center of the universe there dwells a loving spirit who longs for all that's best in all of creation, a spirit who knows the great potential of each planet as well as each person, and little by little will love us into being more than we ever dreamed possible. That loving spirit would rather die than give up on any one of us.'

Does that sound of the Spirit of God to you? It does to me. A Spirit that continues gnaw at the edges of our life, inviting us to remember and recognize that life, real life is not about winning (let alone the trappings of winning), but knowing that the fight has already been won.

A Spirit that is not about screaming out in any sort of a bombastic, 'look at me and follow my way' sort of intonation, but whispering for us to care for the least of these, for in that care, a true way forward is revealed.

A Spirit that not only recognizes that sacrifice is important and necessary, but is able to support all those who lean into Her as they sacrifice for another in love.

Be born again, born of the Spirit, responding to the world not out of fear but out of love.

The other night, Jen and I were watching the 11 PM nightly news broadcast out of New York City. This is something that we regularly do. The interesting this was, that when they finally went to their first commercial break (after about 12 minutes) both Jen and I said, 'That was the hardest 12 minutes of news that we have heard in months.' From assaults, to murders, to tragic accidents, to political name-calling and political unrest (even the weather forecast was rough for that day), everything felt heartbreaking and angst-inducing. As I thought about the effect that report had on me a few weeks later, the hymn lyric, 'I need you every hour' immediately came rushing to the forefront of my mind.

And we do. We need God every hour so that we do not fall back into fear, and instead stand firm in quiet love being born again, one moment to the next.

A couple of years ago, Austin and Jen and I were invited to head over to Diamond Nation, the big baseball complex over Flemington way, to meet some of the players. One of Austin's friends was a member of one of the under 11 teams. Well, at that first gathering, the Diamond Jacks welcomed

Austin to be a part of the team. They hooked him up with jerseys, hats, the whole deal. It was awesome.

Well, we have maintained and fostered that connection now three seasons later, and those boys who were 10 and 11 (and looked like boys as they played on the smaller fields) are not 12 and 13 (and look, by and large, like young men (who occasionally may need to shave) as they play on the big fields).

Last weekend, we were able to get Austin over to see 3 of the 4 games that his team played. They played really well. And Austin did his part too: fist bumps were readily available, and cheers of 'hit it!', and 'strike!' were heard (for the most part!) at appropriate times. At the end of the day, the Diamond Jacks won the tournament and Coach Buck (after he gave Austin a fist bump and said, 'great job this weekend') asked for Austin to line up with his teammates along the third base baseline. Austin clapped with his teammates for the team they defeated and then clapped when the winning trophy was handed to Coach Buck.

Then Buck needed to name a most valuable player.

He looked up and down the baseline and said, 'the MVP is Austin Nace', at which point the Diamond Jacks all break out into cheers as Austin rolls up to receive the MVP trophy and there were fist bumps and double fists bumps a plenty before and after the team photo around home plate documenting the win.

The reason that I bring this story up is because Austin's presence around the team has allowed a group of kids and families who are trained and conditioned to win, that there is more than winning. I'm not saying they don't want to win: they do!

But there is also a very real recognition that supporting one another, even to the point of loving and caring for each other, is, at the end of the day, way more important than balls and strikes. These athletes are learning and living some very God led steps of life, and that is regardless of whether they recognize God in the midst of their life or not.

Here again the Mr. Rogers quote mentioned earlier, 'I believe that at the center of the universe there dwells a loving spirit who longs for all that's best in all of creation, a spirit who knows the great potential of each... person, and little by little will love us into being more than we ever dreamed possible. That loving spirit would rather die than give up on any one of us.'

I believe that is happening in small ways (and maybe large ways as well) through the interactions of Austin, his teammates, and his teammates families, as we are loved into being more than we ever dreamed possible. And where there is love, there is God as well.

The Spirit of God whispers in ways that may seem...unique: being born again, loving even when fear seems like the best response, being reminded of an old children's television show, or the comradery a group of motivated baseball players.

And yet, if we listen, not for the shouts of the world, but for the truths that are of God, we will come to truly appreciate how God is at work in our every day, reminding us that life is not about winning, but discovering and then knowing that the fight has already been won.

**After Sermon Prayer**

God, Your Spirit is at work in our lives inviting us to know, believe, trust, and share. Help us to hear, see, and feel those unique invitations so that we might be able to step out into the world, into our lives, not with fear, but with love. In Jesus' name. Amen.