

May 20, 2012 / Ascension Sunday / David L. Edwards

Remembering Where We Came From

John 3:1-10 *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”*

John 17:6-19 *They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world... As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*

A young girl kept anxiously asking her parents when her newborn brother would be old enough to talk. After this happened several times, the curious and mildly exasperated parents finally asked why she wanted to know. “Because I am beginning to forget.”

Forget what? Forget, lose touch with, her relationship with God. Drifting away from what we were all born with—an immediate and intimate relationship with and awareness of the very Source of our Being. Sophia Cavalletti, who developed worship for children based on Maria Montessori’s insights and experience, knew this. Her work is the basis of Children Worship & Wonder. We don’t have to put into children what they already have. Jesus knew this. He taught that children are closer to the kingdom of God than we are. The kingdom belongs to them. If we don’t become like them, we can’t enter that kingdom, that realm of life as God made it to be.

As we grow older, the conditioning of society, and, unfortunately, religion itself, tends to erode in us that original closeness to God. Our heads become filled with ideas and doctrines and “beliefs”, and our hearts are emptied of awareness. Remember the story of Nicodemus (Ch. 3) earlier in John’s gospel? Nicodemus comes to meet with Jesus under the cover of night. He is a leader of the Pharisees, a professional religious type, yet he is in the dark. He probably knows a lot of stuff, has a head crammed full of “knowledge”. He’s been around religion for a long time. Yet he seems to be looking for something, not knowing exactly what it is, like many of us. He is drawn to Jesus, who is seen by his colleagues as a trouble maker and upsetter of the status quo. Nicodemus fumbles around, saying how great Jesus is and that he must be very close to God. Jesus brushes aside such social niceties, and goes right to the heart of the matter: We need to be born again, born anew, born from above—the Greek

words here mean all of those things.

There is a similar Buddhist story. A monk came to see the Buddha, who was old and near death. The Buddha's assistant, trying to protect his master, did not want to let the man in, but the Buddha insisted on receiving him. The monk asked the Buddha something like this: World Honored One, are the teachers of the other spiritual communities enlightened? The Buddha responded: What does it matter whether they are enlightened or not? What matters is whether you are waking up. What matters is you and your life and whether or not you are really alive. Thich Nhat Hanh comments on this story that when you get the chance to ask a spiritual teacher a question, ask something that can change your life. The rest is a waste of time.

Jesus, too, cut to the most important thing. Let's not talk in generalities or about other people or religions or the world. Let's talk about you, Nicodemus, your life and who you really are. When Jesus talks about being born again, or from above, he means getting back to the Source, back to where we came from. It means reawakening to who we really are after we've been wandering around lost in this world.

The story of Nicodemus is a good backdrop for Jesus' prayer for his disciples. He is about to die and return to the Source, to God. I'm not praying for the world, Jesus says. I'm praying for these who have come to believe what I've told them about you and their relationship with you. They have believed it and are giving themselves to it. They are not from the world, just as I am not from the world. They have chosen to be awake, not asleep, to live in the light, not darkness. And that's very hard to do in this world that prefers sleepwalking and being in the dark. The world of illusory values, like happiness having to do with what we earn or buy or eat or drink, or climbing the ladder to success and receiving recognition or approval. The world that confuses its darkness for light, like killing people because we think we are right, or destroying the sacred creation, or increasing the poverty of the poor while subsidizing the wealth of the wealthy.

Nicodemus asks, Can a man be born again, though, when he is old? Isn't it too late for me? Jesus is saying to him that it doesn't matter how young or old we are. It is never too late to wake up, to come fully alive! It is never too late to realize we are in the dark, that we are asleep, that we are infected by the craziness of our world, and to begin being born anew, from above.

When John talks about the "world," he's not talking about the good creation of

God. He's talking about the world that chooses to stay asleep, in the dark, in forgetfulness. He's talking about the world of human beings and our systems and structures, including our religious ones, and our tendency to get lost from the Source. There may even be a lot of God-talk and Jesus-talk, as there is in our society today, but without real meaning in our lives and actions. As Jesus said elsewhere, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I ask? (Luke 6:46)"

When Jesus says that he and his followers are not from the world, he isn't saying we are aliens from another planet. The aim of Christian life is not to get out of this world but to live in it in a different way. Jesus is talking about remembering our relationship with God and that our being in this world is a tremendous gift and blessing. And we are not here by accident. We, like Jesus, have been sent. Our lives have this deep quality of "sent-ness," of purpose, to nurture, care for, and give to life. God is love—another great theme of John's gospel. And since we are from God, that's who we really are, too.

In John's gospel there are not "good" people and "bad" people. There are simply those who know where they come from and those who have forgotten, or choose to not remember. There are those who would rather stay in the dark, even when it is unfulfilling, unhappy. Because being born anew can be painful. It means letting go of the things that we've become addicted to in our culture, in this forgetful world. It means letting go of the smaller self and discovering the greater self, the true self that is able to transcend itself to embrace others and the world with God's love. Maybe that's why Jesus prays to God for his disciples, for us. We need his prayers. We need Jesus as our spiritual nourishment as we go about this journey of being reborn, of getting back to where we came from, of working with the changes that need to happen in us so that we live as those who are who are awakening to our true life. He does not do it for us, but we draw strength and light from him.

While we were in Portland, Oregon several years ago, I went with our Portland friend Scott to visit the Japanese Garden, a place of beauty, wonder, and peace. There is a large sand and stone garden there, with eight stones placed in it, seven smaller ones and a large standing stone. It reflects the story of a tigress who wanted to test the courage of her seven cubs. So she forced them into the sea so that they would learn how to survive, how to take care of themselves. Seeing the cubs' predicament, the Buddha came and stood on the sea, and became the source of the cubs' sustenance and survival. I thought of the story of Peter wanting to walk on the stormy

sea to Jesus (Matt. 14:22ff; Mk. 6:45ff; John 6:16ff). As long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, he was fine. But when he was distracted by the frightening waves, he sank. Jesus shared and shares our life in this world, along with all our struggles to remember who we are and where we come from. He becomes the source of our sustenance as we continue our journeys of faith. He continues for us today as a living reminder of who we really are and where we really come from.

When we talk here about the inward and outward journeys of the life of faith, we are talking about being in that process of being born again, born anew. The spiritual practices we commit ourselves to—silence, inner listening, prayer, reading of scripture, self-examination and deepening self-awareness—these are the ways we ground ourselves in remembering who we really are and where we come from. And the outward journeys we undertake as we sense and follow what we feel God is calling us to do with our gifts and our lives—these are the ways we live in a transformative way as those who are remembering who we are and where we came from, who are awakening afresh, or for the first time, to the life of this world as God’s creation and our own lives as God’s children.

This spiritual journey is not an instantaneous experience. It is a life-long process or journey. Jesus’ ministry was to wake people up to their true identities. This is what the word “repentance” really means—waking up, taking on a new consciousness, going in a new direction. All of this isn’t easy. That’s why we need to stay close to Jesus, and thus to God. That’s why we have this community whose purpose is encouragement and the nurturing of a spirit of freedom that comes from God’s love for each of us and God’s call to each of us to discover and live fully who God has made us to be for the sake of the world.

It really comes down to this: Am I on the journey of coming to Jesus, like Nicodemus, seeking a new way of being in the world, maybe not even sure what I am looking for but sensing in Jesus the very light of God? Am I engaged in the journey of remembering who I am and where I came from, the journey of being born again, born from above? In the end, that’s what really matters. What the world needs most, and Jesus knew this, is persons who know they are from God, who remember that this world is God’s good creation. I think that is why he said he was praying not for the world but for his followers. Changed people change the world. What is needed most is persons and communities that are actively committed to their own transformation so that they can give to the world something that is light instead of darkness, something

that is remembering instead of forgetfulness, something that is life-giving instead of adding to the destructiveness.

There is plenty wrong with the world. We can sit around and bemoan it all day long. We can complain about others, about our leaders, about conditions of poverty and war and the like. But Jesus calls us into spiritual awakening. He calls us to remember who we are and where we came from. If we are doing that, then we will know both who we really are and what we have to give. We will know where we come from and where God is sending us.