

Second Sunday in Lent, A
Genesis 12:1-14a
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

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When we're trying to dismantle racism, there's a lot to unlearn - starting with our own unexamined habits. In our very first anti-racism study, over three years ago, we discussed a social dynamic that's stuck with me because it keeps on challenging me.

We were discussing "white culture" – that is, typically white ways of behaving that can become a barrier to respectfully communicating and partnering with people of color. We talked about how rugged individualism and competition are marks of white culture. How status, power, and authority are really important in white culture. And what barriers this creates.

For example: When I meet a new person, I find it natural to begin a conversation with a question, "What do you do for work?" or "Where do you come from?" To me it seems harmless, but we learned that in multicultural situations, it isn't helpful.

It turns out it is a very typical white-culture thing to question a person about their work, their background, their family, their schooling – their *status*, in fact. It is a typical white-culture thing to, you might say, *size people up* as we're getting to know them. In a work setting, there's name-dropping. In other settings, we ask just enough social-location questions so we can *rank a person*, mentally. (Ok, got it, she's an Easterner, went to private school, Ivy League university, a professional. He's from the south, blue-collar family, works in the trades, a regular guy.)

It might not be intentional – in fact, it's mostly unconscious -- and because it's unconscious, it's all the more dangerous. Because as we gather information, we are also *judging* and *assessing*: Where does this new person *stand in the power structure*? We're internally deciding who to take seriously, who to respect, who *matters* – and who does not.

The sad truth is, white culture is all about power. White culture cares more about a person's pedigree than about their well-being. These values are baked into us, if we're part of the dominant culture. We have to intentionally reject them if we're serious about living out God's beloved community. Because in God's reign, *everybody matters*.

We learned in our class: "*There's a tendency in white culture to need to label someone, to identify them, before you can relate to them. Like when people say 'What are you?'*"

meaning ‘Are you Korean or Japanese or Chinese or what?’ That’s offensive. People of color are thinking, ‘Why do you need to know that? Can’t you just relate to me without needing to put me in a box?’” (Waking Up White, Debby Irving, p. 213)

I haven’t made that particular mistake, but I’ll admit I recognize many aspects of this dynamic in my own behavior. I have so much to unlearn. We all have so much to unlearn, so we can relate to one another as valued siblings, equally cherished by God.

Nicodemus had a lot to unlearn when he entered into conversation with Jesus. He enjoyed significant political status in his community. We don’t know what kind of prejudices that gave him, but we can guess. Nicodemus was a member of the Council of Jerusalem. On that Council were civic leaders and religious leaders who had power to resolve local disputes. Nicodemus was part of the “Who’s Who” of the capitol city.

Jesus didn’t waste time on small talk. He wasn’t interested in what social circles or family he came from. Right away he told Nicodemus that to perceive God’s kingdom, you need to be “born from above.” What matters is not your human pedigree, but being open to God’s Spirit making you new, wiping out old assumptions and habits, birthing you into a fresh way of relating to God and people. “Born from above” means giving up worldly status for the status of being God’s children. And God’s family operates by a whole different set of rules.

That’s a hard-hitting challenge if you’re invested in the establishment, like Nicodemus. It was true back then, and true now, too. When you are busy guarding your privilege, it doesn’t sound like such a gift to be born from above, re-born, born anew. It sounds like a threat.

Nicodemus seemed sincerely curious, but he was also fearful. He came to Jesus secretly at night. He called Jesus *Rabbi*, or Teacher, but he couldn’t begin to grasp his teachings. To be fair, Jesus sometimes seems to be speaking in riddles in this gospel of John. The conversations operate on many levels at once – practical, symbolic, theological – it can be confusing. But whenever a person is willing to engage with Jesus in conversation, they do begin to catch on. Jesus leads them to connect with God’s good news.

But Nicodemus couldn’t go there. He was holding back. Finally he just faded back into the night. He reacted so differently from the woman at the well, whose story comes next Sunday. She went all in with Jesus. She had nothing to lose and everything to gain. But Nicodemus had a lot to lose, and he couldn’t let it go. Not yet.

Not even to discover the life-changing, loving, intimate, generous relationship his Creator God prepared for him. Not even to experience that place where his restless

heart could finally rest, in communion with God. He missed experiencing how love is at the very center of faith: *"God so loves the world."* Loving the world means loving all people, not just people like me. God's love is the kind of love that kneels to wash feet. It's the kind of love where a divine Savior doesn't stand apart from suffering but will even give his life on a cross to bring all people into divine community. This kind of love doesn't care about privilege, but gives its status away quite freely. Because when we lose our lives into God's life, that is how we gain them.

That's not the way white culture works. Or really any human culture. But as followers of Christ we pursue a better way.

Of course we all know there's another interpretation of this passage making the rounds, with a very specific understanding of "You must be born again." Teaching that to be a real Christian you need a certain kind of born-again conversion, certain style of baptism, certain set of beliefs. Does that make any sense to you, given this passage? Jesus isn't demanding Nicodemus "accept him as his personal Lord and Savior." That's such a simplistic, flattened-down interpretation of what is meant to be a beautifully inclusive invitation. And it has done so much damage, excluded so many people, condemned so many. Yet what do we read here: *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him.*

And not just "souls saved" – whatever that means! – but the world healed in such a broad, expansive, spacious and loving way. The world healed through forgiveness, compassion, courage, justice -- so all people may be free from abuse and have what they need to live. For this kind of saving, God doesn't ask us to be "born again" just once – God calls us to be *born anew* time after time, to keep on being *born from above* to promote God's liberating love. This is the pattern of our life in Christ.

Some friends and I were talking about how much the world has changed in our lifetimes, and how the church's attitudes have been required to change – not as quickly as they might have. There was a time when feminism seemed revolutionary – unfortunately it still does to some churches! – but for us, women are leaders, pastors, bishops. There was a time when words like transgender were unknown to many of us, but we now understand that God creates people with diverse sexual orientations and diverse gender identities, and families can take many different and beautiful forms – and we embrace this. Our extremely white Lutheran church is finally beginning to reckon with racism, though we have far to go. And anti-Semitism, which was promoted by Christians for century upon century, is being called out. There is much more. We are not the same church I was ordained into 35 years ago, and that's how it has to be. We can't stop now.

As long as we are alive, we experience constant change. And God keeps calling us to adapt and show compassion and love in ever-expanding ways. When our hearts and minds are open, following Jesus becomes an ongoing series of conversions, throughout our lifetime. It's a beautiful opportunity, a beautiful challenge, to be part of the spacious, generous way that *"God so loves the world."*

And if we ever thought this was unimportant, all we need to do is open our eyes. Today our teenage girls are struggling with alarming levels of anxiety and depression. Last week several neighborhoods in Oregon City were strewn with hate flyers full of racist and homophobic speech – it was a national "Day of Hate" declared by white supremacist Neo-Nazi groups. Our Jewish and Muslim neighbors have experienced serious property crimes in recent years, right here in Portland. Anti-Asian hate crimes are on the rise. Our hearts are broken time and again by the violence Black citizens experience, including at the hands of authorities.

Our whole society needs to be *born anew, born from above, born again and again*, if we are to shed the old ways of destruction and learn God's new ways of liberation – so that everyone can be set free. Now is the time for loving Christians to be light for the world and salt for the earth, in Jesus' name.

In this Lenten season, as we return to the Lord our God... as we deepen our practice of faith... I leave this with you. I wonder what type of conversion God might be working in us these days. I wonder what attitudes God is reshaping, what actions God is inspiring. What courage God is growing in us. What ways God is softening our hearts and clarifying our minds in this congregation.

It's not up to us to measure. It is up to us to respond as best we can. God's Spirit blows where it wills. Even with old Nicodemus. You might remember that he appears two more times in John's gospel, the last time after the crucifixion, when he brings spices to tend to the body of Jesus and helps to lay it gently in the tomb. It looks very much like Nicodemus came around to honoring the Messiah. It looks like he didn't let go of Jesus after all. And for sure, Jesus never let go of him.

And Jesus hasn't let go of us. Jesus is still loving the world through us. Thanks be to God. Amen.