



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
Stockbridge, Massachusetts

Grounded Yet Blown About

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SCRIPTURE: John 3:1-17

Now 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; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that 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.

SERMON: “Grounded Yet Blown About” The Rev. Brent Damrow

I noticed something happened when Donna got to the end of the reading. When she began those words “For God so loved the world,” I noticed that some eyes shut. I noticed that the countenance of people changed. Those words are among the most powerful words in all of Scripture, and the best known. “For God so loved the world.” It is a phrase so familiar that we often stop at the end there. We assume and we presume and in our hearts we know all of the words that phrase “For God so loved the world.” Familiarity can be a great gift. That which is familiar becomes comfortable. And in an everchanging world, anything of comfort can become a great blessing indeed.

And yet so often when we get to something as familiar as John 3:16, which is the only verse which ever makes it on the signs they hold in the stadium, we often stop and don't hear the rest, and forget the radical truth behind the rest that is about to spill forth. "For God so loved the world." Well, what? If God so loved the world, then what? Nothing short of God joining the world in the most intimate of ways, by becoming one of us. Nothing short of God journeying hand in hand with us. Nothing short of God teaching us, not just with words and sermons on mountains, but in ways of living. For God so loved the world. Nothing short of healing the world, feeding the world, and sacrificing everything for the sake of the world.

And not just what does God do because of God's great love, but why? Which brings us, of course, to John 3:17. God did it all, not to judge or condemn the world, or the likes of you or me or anyone else, but rather all of that was done to save the world. The whole world, those here in church and those still at home. Those who practice a faith and those who don't. The whole world, through love poured out. And we miss all of that if we get too comfortable or too stuck in what we're familiar with, this idea of God loving the world. When we find something familiar, we can hold on to it. We can cherish it, we can enmesh it, we can keep it.

I was a waiter in my high school and college days, and my mother would come to my restaurant as mothers do, to offer a friendly smile and a good tip. The first time she came, she noticed that there was flounder on the menu. She liked the flounder. She liked the flounder so much that the next seven times she came she ordered the flounder. On the eighth time, I listened to what she ordered and risking that generous tip, I brought her something I thought she would like better. Sometimes we find a joy in something and we hold it so tightly that we get stuck in it, that it gets stuck on us. We give those things substance, flesh if you will, and then it becomes not just that we hold on to them, but they hold onto us.

Nicodemus, was a Pharisee, a good thing. A faithful man, a learned man, a man who devoted his thinking and his living to the truths of his faith with every breath he took. He studied Scripture and story until he knew them so well that all of them became as familiar to him as the back of his hand, as his own flesh, with all the gifts and all the challenges that familiarity brings. Oh, Nicodemus knew the story of his faith by heart. The God who created and still recreates, the God who is always on the move, still speaking, we might say today.

In fact, if you look at this passage, the whole reason, though, that Nicodemus recognizes Jesus for who he is and from where he comes is because Jesus does amazing things. Nicodemus notices that Jesus is working great and amazing things, things that transform, things that change, things that uplift. And Nicodemus knows that that is part and parcel of who God is and what God does. "You must be from God," Nicodemus says here at the beginning of this passage. "Because we see all these miraculous, transforming things you do. Such things can only come from God." But Nicodemus' question is really "What do I do with *you*, Jesus? Because quite frankly, Jesus, what you're teaching, what you're showing, how you're living, it messes up so much of what I know, so much of what has been comfortable to me, this faith that has become this thing that I grab onto and cherish, even if it means it's holding it a little too close and boxing it in a little too tight." And I think Jesus' answer here to Nicodemus is to say "No, stop clinging to your faith, because the construct of your faith is clinging to you." That, I think, is the flesh at stake here in this story.

For the Bible, it's hard to argue with flesh, for after all, when God wanted to save the whole world, God became flesh. So after all, in and of itself, flesh cannot be a bad thing, flesh is a beautiful thing. We are, after all, made fleshly beings in God's very own image. We need flesh, we rely on it. And yet, when we focus too much on the needs of the flesh, or of the intellect and things we've figured out, we get stuck in it here and now. I think the essence of what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus on that day and to us here in this church is "Let go of some of that." At least keep a loose grip on it. That the Spirit, that wind that Jesus is talking about might blow new life into it. It's the challenging dance of our faith, isn't it, to become familiar with our story. That's why we show up for Bible studies. That's why we engage our texts and our stories every week. That's why in the reformed tradition a reading of our stories is at the center of our worship every week, that we might draw near to the story, and more importantly, to God who is behind it and in it all, that we might find comfort and peace. And yet the dance is we can't get stuck in the substance of it all, in the flesh of it all.

Let the wind blow, Jesus says. In essence, what Jesus is telling Nicodemus to do is to keep going on this faith journey. Here at the beginning of Lent, keep going, for there is broader comfort, there is deeper peace in the very next step of this journey that we're going to share.

I love John's Gospel. Sometimes it vexes me because John can go on for a very, very long time about the same subject. If you doubt me, this summer there will be five Sundays devoted to bread. John talks about the same thing for a long period of time. But what John also does is that John has Jesus talking to people for a whole lot of time. The Jesus of John's Gospel is patient. He engages people in conversation. He recognizes that Nicodemus is on the right path and he just wants to encourage him to keep going, because Jesus in John's Gospel reminds us that the story of God is big. It's bigger than any one of us, bigger than anything our minds can hold, always just around the corner waiting for us to come and see.

Friends, don't give up on Nicodemus. Even if it might appear he's stuck in these fleshly truths, these solidified understandings, because Jesus doesn't in this passage. What's more, while tradition says that Nicodemus came under the cover of night to stay hidden, I wonder instead if Nicodemus actually comes to Jesus because he's woken up in the middle of the night with a truth that won't let him go. And he can't wait to go and ask those questions. And so he braves the night to find out more, the comfort of the familiar yielding to the innate craving for living, or to the power of that wind that blows.

There is something else that risks becoming overly familiar to us in our worship today. It is all the rituals and practices that we engage in around this table. The story of this table, we could all tell it by heart, right? And just as fair warning, I'm going to test that, because you're going to tell the story a little later. But more than that, that bread – you know exactly how it's going to taste, don't you? The tang of the grape juice in those little tiny cups is all so worn into our psyche, that sometimes I wonder where we stop in this ritual, where we simply let go rather than keeping going, and seeing the surprises that might link to this table.

In fact, each and every time we gather around this table, do you remember what we do right before we eat? We pray a blessing on these elements. If you listen to the prayer, it is very similar week to week. We pray that the Spirit might come down into this meal, twine into the bread, we say, dive deep into the cup, we say, and I think it's all about transformation, but not

just transforming these things into a holy moment, but instead that we might eat these things and the Spirit might enter into us, and that we might be transformed, that we might lose the grip on the familiar and lean into the notion that by eating this we are taking God's Spirit right into us. How could we remain the same after this? Let the wind blow, Jesus tells Nicodemus, who has domesticated the radical loving nature of God. Maybe we too have grown too familiar, too comfortable, with this meal, to understand that it is an absolutely radical event.

There is another part of this liturgy that is familiar too, and I wonder sometimes too comfortable and reduced to habit. We have a tradition in this church and it's lovely. Every time we share this meal, we do something else. We engage in what we call the Active Prayer of Thanksgiving, that moment where we transition from being blessed by this meal to blessing the whole world through our gifts. That radical, powerful, transforming tradition of remembering the hungry alongside of this moment, we remember Christ. Sometimes I wonder if we've become so familiar in the routine of walking around the church and bringing our goods to leave, that we get stuck in the doing rather than remembering the power through it, both for the people the food is going to and also for our own act in doing in it. The reminder of how we are called to rejoice with others and to be with them in their hunger, too. In a few moments, Anne Hutchinson is going to bring that ministry to life, that its radical nature might be reborn in us, that we might let go of something that has grown so familiar that maybe we've gotten stuck in something short of its full potential.

Ironically, Biblical scholarship believes that those two great verses, "For God so loved the world," were actually added to this text later. There is a thought that this story of Nicodemus is so wild and crazy, so mind-blowing and so opening, that they needed to put something in that reminds people of what's going on. Ironically, in the midst of this powerful story about the wind blowing and Nicodemus getting unstuck, we fell back on a tradition of saying no, this is what it all means, just hold on to this and maybe even get a little stuck. Nicodemus, it turns out, didn't need those words. He needed to get unstuck. If you read the rest of John's Gospel, you'll see Nicodemus show up again and again, and each time he does, he's a little more daring and a little more bold. Nicodemus in John's Gospel is not stuck in the familiar, but instead he leaps time and again into a yet unknown future, each time taking a greater and greater leap of faith for the sake of Jesus literally, but also for his own sake, too, until it would be Nicodemus who comes out in broad daylight to care for the crucified Christ. And you know what? Despite all the grief I'm sure Nicodemus carried for Jesus on that day, I bet that night rather than being kept up late at night, he slept deeply and soundly. For the things of the flesh, as vital and important as they are, had come to life in the Spirit on Calvary's hill and even in his loss, too.

Friends, that is what love does. It offers comfort and life. That is what faith does. It offers destination and movement. And it's what this meal does. It offers us sustenance, but it should remind us of hunger, too. And if we let it, the Active Prayer of Thanksgiving will let us offer a blessing but be blessed, too. Love, giving and saving, all part of that God Nicodemus always saw on the move and in action. Today as we hear these most familiar words, may we experience it around this table. May we experience it around that table as we bring our gifts. And then, may we live into that Spirit with each breath we take. That is our message for the beginning of this Lent. Amen!

The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor