

**Joy Comes from Trusting in God, not Ourselves**  
**based on John 3:1-17, David Jahnke, 3/12/17**

So the session is reading a wonderful book called *The Agile Church*. The author spoke of what religion often becomes in the modern and post-modern world.

**Beginning in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a shift occurred toward the idea that what we owe God is essentially the achievement of our own good. Rather than God's glory being the primary end, humanity became...an end in itself. Grace (unmerited favor) was eclipsed by reason and discipline, by which humans can rise to the challenge of recognizing and realizing God's order for the world. Mystery receded and religion [was] narrowed to moralism—working diligently through self-discipline to do the right thing, which is achievable without any particular reference to or assistance from God. [*This is basically works-righteousness gone bad.*]**

With this in mind, today I want to talk about faith in God's salvation as the only source of chronic joy as opposed to the insecurity of modern faith in the self. Because when our own power and goodness is the way to paradise, we are placed under tremendous pressure to succeed; to be good and smart and powerful enough to make our own paradise-- which fills our lives with anxiety and overwork. And on top of that, paradise is often understood to be secure and independent living free from trials and tribulations which is not only a myth, it also separates us from our God of redemption; our God who is all about being present to and saving those who are going through trials and tribulations.

I think Nicodemus was sensing a need for more than being good. He was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin-- the council of law-makers and enforcers of goodness. He recognized that there was something more to Jesus. Jesus was going deeper than whether or not people had achieved some righteousness; deeper than their own abilities or lack thereof. He was present to people and helped them no matter what. And he was also doing signs that revealed a God who was beyond human intellect or willpower.

Nicodemus is where many of us are. We are basically good people we who have an intuitive sense that God is real and beyond our intellect and senses; there have been certain signs alive in our conscience or our experience that we cannot easily shake. We are also tired of relying upon ourselves and no longer want to push God to the periphery.

And if God is in the center, we are connected to everyone around us. Nicodemus was blessed to have Jesus to go and have the body of Christ to rely upon. But they are not going to have all the answers; Nicodemus was mystified by Jesus. And the same happened over and over in the gospel of John. God's Word and Spirit come to life through presence, not answers.

I remembered a time when a mother spoke to me about her daughter and all of the questions she had about why there is so much evil if God is good and powerful, along with other tough questions. I let the mother know that I would be glad to meet with her but that these questions were the same ones that the great philosophical and theological minds had not really found satisfactory answers to; at least satisfactory in a way which does away with God's mystery and the need to trust in a God of mystery.

Now we pastors are supposed to have all the answers so I am sure she was disappointed. But wanting to have all of the answers is part of the problem. Thinking we can and eventually will have all of the answers leads to self-righteousness, judgment, and a rejection of the invisible, intangible and mysterious things of heaven-- values and morals and virtues. It even does away with the mystical presence and calling of the Spirit and in all these ways and more, it

Instead of needing all the answers before we relate to God or thinking we pretty much have all of the answers when it comes to our relationships with others, we should instead embrace the mystery of God and seek to encounter Jesus in others, even in our opponents.

Again here Nicodemus is a great example. Jesus had already overturned the money tables and made enemies on the Jewish Council which Nicodemus was a part of. And yet Nicodemus was willing to meet him and learn more.

I watched a movie the other night about a Washington D.C. rock-and-roll and jazz musician. He is an African American who has been reaching out to his seeming enemies in the KKK-- whom he wondrously considers his friends. And in so doing, he is bringing Christ's transformation and reconciliation. Watch a little about what he has been doing. *Start video cued at 18:20 or so. Accidental Courtesy now streaming on Netflix*

How does this redemption happen? It happens through an encounter with the Son of Man. Davis acknowledges the humanity and the freedom and profound potential for goodness inside the other--- in other words he recognizes Jesus in them. And as he engages them not so much with the idea of intellectually converting them but simply by relating to them, doing things for them, and trying to be their friend, the Spirit rises up within the other again and again and eventually they are born again from above.

*Prepare video from 13 minutes left...pic of Abraham Lincoln. Accidental Courtesy now streaming on Netflix*

I have one more excerpt to show you related to meeting Jesus in the dark places within us. One of the former KKK guys is testifying:

So this gentleman found light in the darkness. And he was born from above. And as the Son rose upon his life, everything was transformed and made new. And then his own darkness became a source of redemption for others. And you can see the newfound joy in his face.

I think we saw an example of that in the joy and praise of our visitors last Sunday. They know that God does not just want us to be a basically good person who pays little to no attention to Him. Because God is a Father to us. And would you want your child to just basically be a good person but otherwise never call to chat? Would you want them to keep dark secrets from you; secrets that keep them from joy? Wouldn't you like your child to confide in you and be assured of love and forgiveness?

And if you had the power to save them from the darkness of sin and death, wouldn't you let them know? That is what God chose to do in sending his Son Jesus to be our brother. And when we see and believe in the salvation that Jesus reveals through his Love and Mercy and his resurrection; when we converse regularly with our Father, the Spirit descends from above and our lives are filled more and more with tremendous joy.

There is no magic to any of this. But there is a method. Surrendering ourselves over to God by way of faith, again and again. And committing ourselves to prayer.