

Worship Leader: Now there was a prominent religious leader among the Jews named Nicodemus, who was part of the sect called the Pharisees and a member of the Jewish ruling council. One night he discreetly came to Jesus and said...

**Everyone: Master, we know that You are a teacher from God, for no one performs the miracle signs that You do, unless God's power is with them.**

Worship Leader: Jesus answered, "Nicodemus, listen to this eternal truth: Before a person can perceive God's kingdom realm, they must first experience a rebirth."

**Everyone: Nicodemus said, "Rebirth? How can a gray-headed person be reborn? It's impossible for someone to go back into the womb a second time and be reborn!"**

Worship Leader: Jesus answered, "I speak an eternal truth: Unless you are born of water and Spirit-wind, you will never enter God's kingdom realm. For the natural realm can only give birth to things that are natural, but the spiritual realm gives birth to supernatural life!

You shouldn't be amazed by my statement, 'You must be born from above!' For the Spirit-wind blows as it chooses. You can hear its sound, but you don't know where it came from or where it's going. So it is within the hearts of those who are Spirit-born!"

**Everyone: Then Nicodemus replied, "But I don't understand; what do You mean? How does this happen?"**

Worship Leader: Jesus answered, "Nicodemus, aren't you the respected teacher in Israel, and yet you don't understand this revelation? I speak eternal truths about things I know, things I've seen and experienced - and still you don't accept what I reveal. If you're unable to understand and believe what I've told you about the natural realm, what will you do when I begin to unveil the heavenly realm? No one has risen into the heavenly realm except the Son of Man who also exists in heaven.

And just as Moses in the desert lifted up the brass replica of a snake on a pole for all the people to see and be healed, so the Son of Man is ready to be lifted up, so that those who truly believe in Him will not perish but be given eternal life. For this is how much God loved the world - God gave God's one and only, unique Son *as a gift*. So now everyone who believes in Him will never perish but experience everlasting life.

**Everyone: God did not send God's Son into the world to judge and condemn the world, but to be its Savior and rescue it!**

Today is Trinity Sunday when we celebrate the three "expressions" of God that Christianity affirms: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity isn't mentioned in the bible but the fingerprints of the Trinity are all over the scriptures. Jesus identified the Trinity in praying to and talking about His Father, whom He affectionately called Abba, which means Papa. Jesus talked and taught about His Papa-God, and about the Holy Spirit, whom He called the Comforter, and the Advocate. Theologians say that we are relational people because we were created by a Triune relational God... we were created

to be in relationship with God and with each other. They use language about the interconnectedness of God the Creator, who relates to God the Redeemer, who relates to the God Sustainer. Celtic knots are often in designs of three to show the Trinitarian and interrelated nature of God. The Trinitarian God is sometimes called the dancing God.

I'm not a very good dancer; you can ask Ralph about how hard it is for me to move to or to keep a beat. One of my parishioners once commented on my clapping to a song. She said, "It's so cool how you clap against the beat like they do in gospel churches." It was an undeserved compliment... I can't follow a beat. But the dancing God - the relational, Triune God who created and redeems and sustains us out of love of us - that God keeps inviting me to into the dance.

It was late enough this spring in what's informally known as "the appointment season" (January, February, and March) that I didn't think I'd be moved this year. I'd told our District Superintendent about the Messy Church training we had here, and the Congolese refugee family we're supporting, and about being in the groove here, and I felt pretty comfortable that I'd be appointed here again. Until the Thursday after Easter when the District Superintendent called me and told me that the Bishop was appointing me to the Napa United Methodist Church on July 1<sup>st</sup>. It's thrown me. I'm disappointed, I'm grieved, I'm apprehensive, and I'm struggling. I'm struggling to see God's hand in the change; I'm struggling to trust that Jesus is with me in the messy-sorrow of goodbyes and the chaos of moving; and I'm struggling to follow the movement of the Holy Spirit. In the midst of the struggle I'm aware of the rhythm of the Spirit-wind blowing where it will ~ teaching me a new step.

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who was a leader among the Jews. Pharisees were distinguished by their strict observance of the law. The word Pharisee comes from an ancient word that means set apart, or separate. The Pharisees were keepers of tradition as well as overseers of Jewish law, enforcing order to sanctify the every-day world. Being set apart and upholders of the law and of tradition didn't make these men light on their feet. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for looking holy on the outside but being dead on the inside. "I danced for the Scribes and the Pharisees but they would not dance and they would not follow Me. I danced for the fishermen, for James and John, they came to Me and the dance went on." Jesus invited everyone to dance... to learn the rhythms of grace and love and mercy and to move to them. Many people, many religious people, were offended and outraged by Jesus... by the free and easy way He moved through the world, and by the people He danced with.

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus... who came to visit Jesus at night. Nicodemus was a leader of the Israelites, and he couldn't risk being seen in the daylight talking with Jesus. Before this story in John's gospel, is the story of Jesus driving out the money changers in the Temple. He harshly criticized the buyers and sellers in the Temple, saying, "Stop making My Father's house a marketplace!" When they questioned Jesus about His authority to clean out the Temple, He said, "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up." Then they mocked Jesus, telling Him that the Temple had taken 46 years to build... it wasn't possible for Him to rebuild it in just three days. Jesus often spoke with humor and hyperbole and in parables. He was referring to Himself as the Temple

that would be raised up in three days... but those who heard Jesus, who only listened to the words and not the intent or the heart of what He said, took offense. Some of them were Pharisees.

Nicodemus came to visit Jesus at night because, as a leader of the religious community, He couldn't risk being seen conversing with this rabble-rousing Rabbi. It's clear from what he said to Jesus that Nicodemus recognized that Jesus was... God. "No one can do these signs that You do apart from the presence of God" Nicodemus said to Him. Jesus told Nicodemus that no one can see the Kingdom of God without a spiritual rebirth. Was Jesus smiling at Nicodemus right then, hoping that Nicodemus would catch the double meaning of the word He used that meant both "again" and "from above"? Some part of Nicodemus recognized the dancing God in Jesus, and compelled him to seek Jesus out. But perhaps Nicodemus wasn't used to listening to the intent and the heart of holiness. Perhaps he was only used to following the letter of the law. Nicodemus puzzled over the meaning of Jesus' words... and maybe he also puzzled over the idea of a dancing God. Not just the God of Abraham and Moses, a hidden God witnessed in clouds and smoke and lightning... but Jesus, who was in-the-flesh God, and who spoke about the Spirit-wind God. And perhaps rather than puzzle out the three distinct personalities of God, Nicodemus chose an easier response: "Rebirth? How can a gray-headed person be reborn? It's impossible for someone to go back into the womb a second time and be reborn!"

Jesus told Nicodemus that what is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. He told Nicodemus that God-the-Spirit moves - the Spirit dances, if you will - where it wills. And He said that knowledge of the God-the-Spirit is experienced in the heart. This is a pretty short conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Its purpose might have been for Nicodemus to get some clarity about Jesus... but I think more likely it was an opportunity for Jesus to reveal Himself more fully. Jesus was transparent, always authentically Himself, revealing God in what He said and did.

Before people could read and before people owned bibles, there were windows in churches that told bible stories. Picture-windows were a way for people to know God... through the pictures, and also the beauty and craftsmanship in the windows revealed something about the dancing God, the God who could not be contained by religious rules or by any law. Jesus was like a stained-glass window... everything about Him... His compassion for sinners and outcasts, His love for women and children, His healing touch, His accepting and inclusive welcome for anyone who wanted to follow Him, revealed God. Not just the God the Israelites knew... but the Triune God, the dancing God. The God who is always loving us, always wooing us, always inviting us to join the dance of redemption and healing and life.

Experiencing the dancing God... God the Creator, Jesus, the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, is like falling in love. It's a matter of the heart. It's trusting what you can't see, and moving with the rhythm of possibility.

Nicodemus didn't just visit Jesus this one time. He would defend Jesus against the Temple authorities, and he would later bring spices to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. Nicodemus was changed and captivated by the dancing God he met in Jesus,

who is the Triune God we celebrate today: God the Father, who out of love for the world God created sent Jesus, who out of love for the world lived with us and died for us, who sent the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, who nudges and warns and guides us to have eyes to see and ears to hear the coming Kingdom of God the Creator. This dancing God invites us into a dance of love and healing and joy. We don't get to tell the Spirit-wind where to blow... we can only trust and follow.

Right now these would be good words for me to have tattooed on the back of my hand... trust and follow. I don't get to choose where I serve God and the Methodist Church. When I was ordained, Bishop Brown washed my feet and he said to me, "Love the people. Tell them about Jesus." I need to let the Spirit-God move where it will and teach me to dance in a new place.

Everything Jesus said and did revealed God. Nicodemus recognized this... he saw, maybe against his better judgement, and certainly against his religious training, he saw in Jesus the fullness of God, the dancing Triune God. I love what Jesus said to Nicodemus at the end of their conversation. "For this is how much God loved the world - God gave God's one and only, unique Son *as a gift*. So now everyone who believes in Him will never perish but experience everlasting life. God did not send God's Son into the world to judge and condemn the world, but to be its Savior and rescue it!"

This is the good news Nicodemus heard. This is the good news we hear today... that in Jesus the dancing God is revealed as a gift to us, and to all humanity. And the dance is all about love. Out of love for us God sent Jesus, who out of love for us sent the Holy Spirit, who out of love for us includes us in building and revealing the coming Kingdom of God. This is how much God loved the world... this is how much God loves you. Amen. Let's sing together now "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."