

Trinity Sunday

Year B

June 7, 2009

Last week, on Pentecost Sunday, I told you about an experience I had and how it had reinforced my belief that the *true* potential of the Church lay in its willingness to stay focused on *spiritual formation*. While I may have not said so then, that is not always an easy job. A call to *spiritual formation* does not have a sexy ring to it. It is relatively easy to generate initial excitement and support for a response to a natural disaster or a brief, hands-on interaction with those in need. However, unless the soil – we people – have been properly prepared for the work and frustration that invariably goes hand and hand with such needs, we face the very real chance of being like the seeds that were sown in shallow soil, on rocky ground. We spring quickly into action, but with no depth of *formation*, we equally quickly wither away.

And so today I want to talk some more about *spiritual formation*, from a different perspective; and, hopefully, tie that back into the crucial part it can play in our call to continue the work of Jesus in our world. To that end, I ask you to imagine that we are in a theater. A theater-in-the-round, with a stage that is brightly lit. A solitary figure, Jesus, stands on the stage. Slowly the light spills over into the first few, surrounding rows. We are seated in those rows and as our eyes adjust to the light we begin to make out some of the other faces in the audience. There is John, the beloved disciple, and Fred, who runs a local gas station and builds Habitat for Humanity houses in his spare time.

There is Peter, the *rock*, and Jennifer, who tutors autistic children. There is Mary Magdalene and the man who works at the library and sings in the choir, as well as the quiet couple, with the anxious looks, who come to church every Sunday and sit apart from everyone else. In other words, gathered in the light around the stage are the mixed bag of folk who, for as many reasons as there are people, have chosen to follow Jesus. They are saints; and, they are sinners; believers who struggle to believe; betrayers who have been restored by mercy; people – not so unlike us – who get up every morning and strive to put one foot in front of the other to do what they can.

Beyond these are a vast sea of people we do not recognize and from that sea a man emerges from the dimmest corner and walks onto the stage with Jesus. He says his name is Nicodemus and he has come to see Jesus. It turns out he is a leader of the Jewish people - a Biblical character, from the days of Jesus. He asks if we are not getting a bit carried away by all these *religious characters*. He is our skeptical neighbor who has no use for “churches”; the guy at work who smiles at the backwardness of those who pray; the girl at school who scoffs at anybody who believes that “junk”; the unseen voice inside us who sometimes wonders if our own faith is just an illusion.

Nichodemus has the savvy to recognize that Jesus is up to something extraordinary – that Jesus’ faith certainly seems to have a mysterious power – but, yet, all that he knows tells him that Jesus is just another mortal man, like himself. *Rabbi*, Nichodemus says to Jesus, “*we know that you are a teacher who has come from God...*” And with those words Nicodemus places himself among those who recognize the *extraordinary*, the *mysterious power*, of Jesus, but still have not made the leap from a *good man* to the *Son*

*of God.* He is like a moth that is drawn to a flame, but invariably flies back into the darkness. I suspect the same can be said about most of us, from time to time. It is a leap virtually all of us have to make repeatedly. On our *good days* we are motivated and empowered by a *spirit* we can neither see nor explain.

And then there are those days in which the ebb and flow of the world takes control of our lives. Those gathered around the stage have certainly known this reality in their own lives. They have experienced the trials and tribulations and temptations of a world that constantly encourages that which can be understood and controlled, as opposed to the mystery of faith. A culture that observes people praying, serving and thanking God and is persuaded that, in the end, such faith serves no practical end. So, how does Jesus respond? Does He belittle Nicodemus for his lack of faith? Does He explain the mystery, so there is no longer mystery? Does He attack the values of Nicodemus' people? No, Jesus does none of these things.

What He does do is remind this leader of His people of the difference between the earthly and the spiritual.

*“What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit... You must be born from above. The 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.”*

In other words, if you are to know – truly know – Me you must be reborn. You must be willing to embrace the mystery and let it take you where it will. Only through the *transformation* of your soul will you be able to enter into

the reality of a *new life*. Nicodemus did not understand. He could not let go of the life he already thought he understood.

*“You claim to have a changed life, but how can that be? You say you are a new person, but that is not really possible. You’re just the same old person with a little extra piety lathered on.”* Back and forth the exchange goes. Each one speaking out of a different frame of reference. Finally, Nicodemus shouts, *“What has happened to you? How can you justify what you are suggesting. Why do you no longer believe what your family taught you to believe?”* And Jesus gently responds, *“We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen. Why does Fred work hard all day and build Habitat Houses on Saturday? Why does Betsy teach Sunday School, year after year, and why did my beloved disciple fall on his knees at the sight of an empty tomb?*

*And why does Jennifer care about those autistic children? I will tell you why. The Spirit from above has spoken to them and their lives are a witness to what that experience means.”* My dear brothers and sisters *that experience* – and the change it makes in our lives – is the ultimate payoff for the hard work of *spiritual formation*. It is nothing less than the pathway to *being* the followers of Jesus we all want to be.