

Scripture: John 3:1-17

3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

3:2 He 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."

3:3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

3:4 Nicodemus 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?"

3:5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

3:6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

3:7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'

3:8 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."

3:9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

3:10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

3:11 "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.

3:12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

3:13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

3:14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

3:15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

3:16 "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.

3:17 "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.

Communion Meditation

We are learning to sail- harnessing the winds of the Spirit in this early summer series. Last Sunday we talked about the Holy Spirit in general. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are created to sail as we experience the peace and the power of God today through the work of the Holy Spirit. Today I want to talk about rowing or sailing. Consider if you are a rower or a sailor in life.

Rowing, at first, seems easier. You don't need lessons to row. For most of us it comes naturally. You sit still, center yourself, and begin pulling. There are instant results. You are moving and making

progress. You learn pretty quickly to adjust so that you are not going in circles. You get to chart your own course, determine your direction, and as long as you row hard, you can get there. In rowing, we can feel independent. We can do it all by ourselves. And it is pretty safe. How many headlines read, "Rowing Accident on Lake Hartwell"?

Many of us like to row. But there can be a downside. Rowing can be exhausting. If it is all up to us, we have no one upon whom we might depend. I look out on Sunday and see the faces of some of us, you have been rowing hard and seem weary as if you have been in battle. If you are like me, I like the idea of sailing, but are more apt to be a rower. The point of our sermon series to learn to align our lives with the work of the Holy Spirit. Disciples of Jesus are students, learners- that is what the word "disciple" means.

Sailing takes some instruction and practice. In sailing, we are dependent on the power of wind. You have to hoist sails, redirect them, and learn knots- lots of knots. You have to pay attention to wind speed, the sun, a compass. And we have to learn a whole new lingo, a language that sailors use.

Learning to discern and follow the Spirit can seem complex as well. Using the sailing metaphor for our lives as Christians, it takes a lifetime of learning and practice to learn to sail. This is not a quick fix. We are dependent on the wind, on God. We do not get to be in control, but we trust that God is up to something. When the wind is low, sailors have to tact, zigzagging back and forth to harness the winds. They get where they need to go, but they do not usually go directly. Sometimes there is delayed gratification in sailing. There are periods of waiting, sitting still. Not many of us like to wait, we would rather be busy or at least look busy. But the Christian faith has periods of waiting. The word we use is discernment. We have to pray, ponder, worship, and wait for the leading of the Spirit. That is discernment.

Sailors tell us that what they love about sailing is this, it is an adventure. There are bursts and periods of movement and excitement followed by restful waiting. We have to listen for the signs and cooperate with our mates, our crew. In the Navy everyone must listen to the commands of the Captain. In our church life, the Captain is not the Session or the pastor, the Captain is Jesus. In our personal faith journey, Jesus is the one who commands our path. When we cooperate with the Spirit, we go to places we would never have gone, and we go faster and further than we could have gotten there all by ourselves. We need one another to learn and listen together. We need encouragement. If we try to live out the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount- loving enemies, caring for the poor, binding up the broken-hearted, all by ourselves, we will fail. We need other followers and the Holy Spirit to help us. When I speak with someone who seems battered by life, exhausted, I tell them to just come to worship and BE in the presence of God with a community. God loves us more than we can imagine, and desires what is best for us. So we need to connect to God and feel supported by his people.

I was in contact with a member who was expecting a new grandbaby this week. As she sat in the waiting room, she asked me to pray for her patience. If you have ever waited on a baby to be born, you understand that there is lots of waiting, some anxiety, including a gestation period. We learn that God's timing involves waiting, preparing, listening, for something new to be born, for new life to emerge. Sometimes we just have to be in the presence of the God who loves us to be renewed or recover from all our rowing.

In our gospel reading today, we read about Nicodemus who seeks out Jesus. Nicodemus is drawn to Jesus for same reasons many of us are. Jesus offers new life, purpose, and peace. Nicodemus comes under the cover of darkness because he is not quite sure of Jesus. Jesus reminds us that God offers new life in the Spirit. There is a Spirit birth- a being born from above. Some translations read "born again" but the true meaning is "from above." Or another way to understand the words of Jesus is that we are to be "kingdom born." Jesus says, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." Nicodemus is stuck on the literal meaning, but Jesus is offering new LIFE.

I do not know about you, but I know living dead people. They are dead in their hearts, and they need reviving. The Sailing life is about living fully in the presence of God following the Captain, Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus states his whole purpose in John 3:16-17- out of God's great love for the world, he sent Jesus to bring us eternal life, not to condemn us to death. God is a God of love and life! "Eternal life" is a quality of life, not life in the hereafter only. Think about a circle, like a wedding band, it never ends, it in continues forever. God's love is like that. Eternal life is not a reward for hard rowing, good work. Eternal life is in the here and now. It is a quality of life in the Spirit. It is being in the Kingdom of God. We cannot earn it or buy it or create it, it is a GIFT from God. Salvation is a gift from the love and grace of God. We can never deserve it or manufacture salvation, we can only receive it and respond to it.

I love Nicodemus. I used to think he was a skeptic, a half-hearted believer, a secret believer. He has been portrayed that way in church tradition. But I think of him, like all of us, as a work in progress. We are all "under construction." To believe and follow Jesus would have cast Nicodemus out of the synagogue, his place, his people. But we learn later in the gospel that Nicodemus stands up for Jesus to receive a fair trial before the Sanhedrin. He even cares for Jesus at his burial, bringing spices with Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus' body.

I think Nicodemus is like many of us- working and rowing through the life of faith. But the Spirit led life is one that relies on the power of God and opens us up to a new adventure. I feel sad for Nicodemus that he did not spend time with Jesus and his disciples sooner. He was halfway in and halfway out. And he missed out on the richness and the fullness of life with Jesus.

Nicodemus was more of a rower, less of a sailor. Nicodemus was playing it safe. Faith for him was following the law, the commands. Rowing, like upholding all the Law, is dependent on us. If you stop

rowing, to rest, to eat, to sleep, you start drifting. Better keep rowing. Rowing is slow- no one crosses the ocean in a row boat. No one rows around the world, they sail. Rowing all alone is hard. But much of our lives are spent doing it. And faith requires dependence on the power of the Spirit and trust, lots of trust.

Each of us has a story. For me, I learned by losing a father at age 10, that I better work really hard. I better grow up and earn a good living, not be dependent on a spouse to provide for me. I saw my bookkeeper mother struggle financially and emotionally to provide for and raise three children. I was going to take care of myself, not need anyone. I was going to be independent. I would be the one who could take care of others, not receive care. I had a very good mentor confront me about this. She was my boss at Presbyterian College. She did it in a fun and loving way, but I needed to hear it. By being in Christian community, I learned to trust God and others with my life, all of my life- finances, relationships, and vocation. Oh, I was a believer. I had committed my life to Christ, and knew I needed God's help. But, I learned that none of us can survive alone. We need God's Spirit to guide us, to teach us, and to live in us. And we need to others who are trying to follow Jesus, too.

What is your story? Are you more rower or sailor?

Jesus offers a relationship. Oh, Jesus does indeed, make demands on us. He calls us into a life of obedience and faith. But that life is an adventure filled with love, a saving love. To be a part of the kingdom life is a lot like sailing. It is not safe. If you want to stay safe, stay in the rowboat, stick close to shore. Keep trying to chart your own course. It may work for a while, but in the end it is futile.

Today we are invited to this Table to eat with our Lord Jesus and all of his friends here today. We come to this table to be filled with God's grace and strength for the journey. We are dependent on God. Jesus said, if you abide in me, I will abide in you. By the Spirit, Jesus lives in us and we live in him, but we must receive what he offers- himself. He invites us into a life that is risky, adventurous, invigorating, and full of joy, but we have to reach out our hands to receive what he offers- his own body and his blood- his very life, that we might live through him. And we never come to this table alone, but with all the other folks who like Nicodemus are "works in progress."

Want to live fully in the life of the Spirit? Then come hungry and empty, and be filled with the provisions that only Jesus can provide.

Laura Smith Conrad
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church