

Faith Formation for Nicodemus

John 3:1-17 by Patty Friesen (March 8/20)

It captures our imagination that Nicodemus comes under the cover of night to visit Jesus. Why does Nicodemus come at night? Is he afraid to be seen with Jesus? Why does he come at all? Does he come with a list of questions of who Jesus is? If he came looking for answers, he must have left with more questions. Jesus speaks to him in metaphors of second birth and wind to try to describe what faith is all about which confuses Nicodemus and confuses me as a modern reader even more. It feels like maybe even Jesus is grasping for words and images to describe faith. Jesus is talking to a teacher of the law - a linear, logical black and white rule oriented person and asking them to change their way of thinking - to begin thinking about God metaphorically in terms of human birth and nature's wind - how a physical birth describes a spiritual rebirth. How the mystery of wind describes the unpredictable way God moves. This is the first lesson in faith formation in the Gospel of John and it is a rather nebulous one.

I've been thinking about faith formation ever since Pastors' Week at Canadian Mennonite University where weary pastors gather to try to get inspiration and pump each other up about faith formation when it feels like people need traditional faith, Anabaptist or otherwise, less and less. At CMU we learned we are operating under old assumptions that people will come to church regularly out of desire or habit or need to socially connect. In the old days, church was the only Sunday activity in town and youth were strongly encouraged to take catechism and get baptized in herds. This doesn't happen so much anymore. Nowadays, Sundays and weekends are family time - which is a good thing and there are more places to socially connect like sporting

groups or art groups or friendship groups. You could hear the collective weary pastoral sigh in the room.

We Mennonites all know our congregations are shrinking, which directly impacts our budgets and congregations ability to afford big buildings and pay full time pastors. These societal shifts impacts our private high school and our private university and camps. In Mennonite Church Saskatchewan, we are closing a rural church every year as farm families are smaller and farm larger and elders move to the city. Our city churches are holding their own because they are able to have university students come and stay and we are doing OK in Osler because we have committed young families bringing their children and we know the importance of faith formation in Sunday School and youth group and VBS and we invest pastoral resources to this work. But we still have to keep our eyes and conversations open as a local congregation and as a conference so we can be intentional and adaptive and hopeful about faith formation in the midst of societal change.

Something that gives me great hope is the creative and brilliant ways our Sunday School teachers, youth leaders and Nora are helping form faith in our children and youth. It gives me hope to see how our camps and religious schools are forming faith in the next generations. I continue to be impressed with the service emphasis at Rosthern Junior College and I will never forget when Katherine and Liam and Adam and Leo and Micah have shared their perspective and faith changing experiences in BC, Guatemala, Alabama, and inner city Saskatoon. It was powerful to hear our MCC 100 faith stories of how previous generations made blankets, sponsored refugees and cooked verenike to sell and those who served in North America and overseas had their faith shaped by

their interactions with other cultures. The idea for this kind of sharing came from our Community Connections committee based on how we heard OMC 90 stories shared two years ago. The next generations need to hear us share our stories of our growing and changing faith so they know how to speak of theirs.

At Pastors' Week, I was impressed with Irma Fast Dueck's Faith Formation Class at Canadian Mennonite University that shares five objects that symbolize their experiences of God in the valleys and mountains of their lives. It is a powerfully personal and metaphorical way of looking at God's presence and by sharing those symbols in class, we could see the bond and community that kind of vulnerability created between classmates. We have been trying this kind of faith sharing using objects or metaphors in the Christianity and Culture Sunday School Class. I will share here what I shared last Sunday about how these three objects or three metaphors that symbolize experiences I have had with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

This is the first book I was ever given, "Who Loves Patty?" It is well worn and well-loved as it is over 50 years old now! From this very first book I learned to look at and read, I knew books could contain an engaging story that connected to me in some way. (Read). Ever since this book, I have had other books come to me throughout my life and at the right time in my life that helped me understand other people better, or helped me feel less alone. Other examples of significant books would be Refuge by Terry Tempest Williams who found refuge for her soul in the wildlife refuge in Utah. Like me, she grew up in a conservative religious setting that only allowed men to provide ministry. When her mother was dying, she didn't wait for the male Mormon elders to anoint her mother but anointed her mother with oil herself. That powerful

courageous act of prayer inspired me when my dad was dying and I anointed my dad with oil and prayer. The right book seems to find me at the right time as a companion for whatever I am going through. In this respect, books remind me of Jesus' human and God's Holy Spirit led companionship also in my life through the right words in scripture or through other books.

My second symbol for God's presence in my life is my own story written through many journals. I got my first diary at age 10 from my grandparents - a little pink diary with a lock. It was an amazement to me then to believe my thoughts may be worthy of writing down and locking up so no one else could read them. From that diary, I was hooked on journalling. I have written in spiral bound scribblers with cheap Bic pens and now that I'm making money, I buy beautiful journals and pens from Soul Paper on 20th Street because my thoughts are worth it! I have 40 plus years worth of journals that have accompanied me also through high school angst and dumb boyfriends and continue to accompany me in my work and relationships with family members. At this stage of my life, I am actually burning those old journals of high school gangs and dumb boyfriends because I am finished with those stages of life and no one else needs to read about them. But I am also reading back on old journals and am blessed by them a second time in seeing how God again provided people to inspire me or poetry or scripture and how I grew or didn't grow in some way. In general as I read back, I've gained more courage and hopefully a little more wisdom. This journal represents God's ongoing patient, guiding, forgiving and empowering presence in my life.

The third symbol are the candles that I light beginning in November already through March on dark evenings and mornings. I struggle with the absence of sunlight

but have found a hopeful calming comfort in gentle candlelight by which I read and journal. Catholics in Mexico light candles in the churches that burn all day because they believe the candles do the praying for them. I like that symbol. Often I don't have the words to speak to God so I light a candle and let it go through my Tuesday work from home mornings to keep as a sign of my prayer and God's gentle flickering presence all through the dark winter months.

If this has inspired anyone else's objects as part of faith sharing in worship or Sunday school, please talk to me. Let us pray...

Thank you God for the ways you reveal yourself to us in birth and rebirth and wind and books and journals and candles and all things. Bless us in this season of Lent as you seek us and we seek you again. Amen.