

INHERITING THE WIND

John 3.1-8

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John 3.1-8

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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 Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'
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?' ⁵ Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." 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.'

Sermon

"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." (John 3.8)

Well, here we are again. I wonder if the Spirit is trying to tell me something because, if you were here last Sunday, you heard me talk about a prayer Phil and Belle brought back to us from a lay preacher in a little village church in the Bahamas. The prayer is about being grateful:

We thank you for the mystery of creation:

*for the beauty that the eye can see, for the joy that the ear may hear,
for the unknown ...*

As I said last week, that stopped me in my tracks. Grateful for the unknown? Really?

I'm in the Nicodemus camp on this one. When Nicodemus, the great religious leader of his time, comes to Jesus by night for a conversation, he says: "Rabbi, we *know* that you are a teacher who has come from God." Let's talk about what we know.

And Jesus says: "It's like this, Nicodemus, 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; and that's what the children born of the Spirit are like."

What if the spiritual life has something to do with how we deal with the unknown?

I've noticed that people who appear to me to be not very spiritual in any authentic way are very convinced about what they know. They can be closed-minded and fearful and reactionary. And before this sounds like an indictment on somebody else, let me just say that, on some days, that's me – especially if I'm watching election coverage.

Pentecost is the story of our spiritual ancestors coming to terms with the power of a Spirit that was energizing all kinds of people outside the boundaries of their own expectations. It was a free-for-all. It was shocking. It was unnerving. It was not what they knew. They were being plunged by the Spirit into the unknown.

And so teachers along the way would offer some guidance like that great list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. If you are looking for evidence of the Spirit look for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

But I wonder if, in the Spirit of not knowing, we might add curiosity. Think about curiosity as a spiritual practice. Imagine recovering that amazing capacity children have to engage the world with wide eyes and busy hands, exploring and testing and trying things out.

Or perhaps generosity on that list would include a generosity of spirit – an openness that does not try to defend itself against the unknown but instead welcomes it and embraces.

Perhaps, in the Spirit of not knowing, we would highlight patience on that list as a commitment not to rush to judgment.

And maybe gentleness would be humility because how could the Spirit of not knowing lead us to anything else?

What if one of the most spiritually powerful things you can say is: “I don’t know.”

I think a lot of the push toward mysticism and contemplative spirituality in our time is this recognition that at least part of our spiritual lives is about embracing what we do not know.

And that, for me at least, is a lot harder to do than to say. If I am to embrace the spirituality of not knowing, it’s going to take a lot more than a book, more than a retreat, more than a flash of enlightenment.

It’s going to mean giving myself to the world in a whole new way.

And that’s hard when I have spent all this time believing – or being made to believe – that my value is tied up with what I know.

Now this is not to say that I don’t know things.

My dad used to say that when people are in crisis they may say that they don’t know anything. And it’s good to encourage them to name one thing they *do* know – even if that is just that the sun will come up tomorrow or that “Jesus loves me this I know.”

The spirituality of not knowing isn’t about not knowing anything. It’s just that we recognize that there is always a limit to what we do know.

And sometimes the gift of not knowing is that it reminds us of the things we really do, fundamentally, deeply know. I've seen this, and you probably have to, when someone comes to the end of his or her life or someone faces a critical moment where it is impossible to know what comes next, there is this movement toward the things we know really matter – relationships and beauty and forgiveness and gratitude and love.

The spirituality of not knowing isn't about not knowing anything but it is to recognize that there is always a limit to what we know and always a possibility to be reminded of the deepest and most powerful things we know.

And let me be clear – since religious communities are especially good at this – the spirituality of not knowing is not the same thing as denial.

We prayed this morning for several of our members and friends who are this weekend, along with members of the Bet Alef Meditative Synagogue, in action at the Marche Point oil refinery in Anacortes. It's part of a global effort to bring awareness – to break through the denial – about climate change.

And that's important because it seems like denial has become a kind of drug. I realize that denial may be a natural stage in dealing with the unknown. But it seems like, in our time, it has become a drug – a way of self-medicating when we get overwhelmed by the unknown. “Ignorance is bliss,” we say. And we like the way bliss makes us feel. We like that it makes us feel powerful and protected.

Something makes us uncomfortable, deny it. Something messes with what we think we know, no problem, deny it. Something challenges our way of life, just deny it. It feels good.

So we get addicted to it.

And then the bottom drops out or reality crashes in or we get that news we have been dreading and we find ourselves at Deniers Anonymous where we have to start by saying what we know about ourselves and to admit that we are powerless in the face of the unknown.

The spirituality of not knowing isn't the same thing as denial. It isn't a refusal to know. It is a recognition that there is always a limit to what we do know.

My theological mentor, the Mennonite theologian at Harvard, Gordon Kaufman, says that when we talk about God as Mystery we are not suggesting that Mystery is the answer to all our questions. You may have been in conversations where Mystery is the easy answer for anything. The conversation stops there because there isn't anything more to say.

But Mystery isn't an answer. It's not the end of a conversation. It's the beginning. It's an invitation. It's an invitation to ask more questions. And, ideally, better ones. It's an invitation to the spiritual practice of curiosity. It's an opportunity for discovery and the promise of growth. And it's the humility of remembering that whatever we know – or think we know – it is never all there is.

Now I say all this as someone who is not a big fan of not knowing. But I think the Spirit is trying to teach me something. At the very least, I think the spirituality of not knowing is about not being afraid of the unknown.

Imagine all the scientific discovery that is the result of embracing the unknown. Think of how revolutionary it would be for human development if we could cultivate a consciousness that was unafraid of the unknown – think about how that would change our relationship to the world and to each other and to ourselves.

How would our relationships with other people be different if we were guided by the Spirit of not knowing?

You probably know what it's like for someone to know one thing about you and assume that they know everything. That's why I don't like to tell people on airplanes that I am a pastor – and definitely not a Baptist pastor. All it takes is for someone to have that piece of information and they think they know all there is to know about who I am. Maybe it's gender or color or sexual orientation or age or how you dress or where you went to school. Having any of that information is all some people think they need to know all about you.

The Spirit of not knowing reminds us that each person we meet is more than anything we can see or hear or know. What if we don't allow ourselves to get distracted by what we think we know and learn to embrace the unknown in each other – like those ice-breakers where people are to introduce themselves by telling the group something no one there would know about them. Frankly, I always cringe when that happens. But the exercise is a good one because it reminds us that any time we are with one another we are in the presence of the unknown.

And, just to be clear, “I don't know” is not the same thing as “I don't care.” Sometimes when Patrick asks me what I want for dinner and I say “I don't know,” what I really mean is “I don't care.”

I would remind you that the great love chapter in I Corinthians 13 comes in the middle of a long conversation Paul is having with the church at Corinth about spiritual gifts. In the years after Pentecost, apparently there is all this confusion and conflict over just how the Spirit is supposed to be at work among us. And Paul says: “If I speak with the tongues of mortals and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge ... but do not have love, I am nothing.”

To embrace the unknown in the world and in each other and in ourselves takes all the strength and all the energy of love. It takes, as Paul says in I Corinthians, patience, kindness, gentleness, humility, not having a short fuse and having a lot of persistence. And, in the end, he says, love is this promise of knowing and being known – “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face; now I know only in part, then I will know fully even as I am fully known.”

This is, I think, one of the most beautiful expressions of love – to be open to the unknown in another and to allow ourselves to be known. Not to hide or pretend or imagine that there is one thing, if people knew that thing about you, they would know everything.

As Rod Romney says in the hymn we are about to sing:
*We lift our hearts, we bring our lives,
Just as we are, without disguise.*

The great religious leader, Nicodemus, came to Jesus that night to talk about what he knew. And he probably knew a lot. And Jesus says to him: “Look Nicodemus, it’s like this: 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.”

As children of that Spirit of not knowing, we have inherited the wind. And we don’t exactly know where it comes from or where it is going but we can see that movement among us and hear the sound of it in curiosity and openness and patience and humility and in that greatest of all spiritual gifts – love.

And today, if you hear that voice – if you hear the sounds of love whispering in your soul – do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Gordon Kaufman’s primary book on God as Mystery is *God-Mystery-Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World* (Fortress Press, 1996).