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Catching The Wind

John 3:1-10

Nicodemus didn't understand. He didn't get it. But he wanted to. Being a leader of the Jews, a respected teacher it looks like he didn't want anyone to see him sneaking to see Jesus. He came to him "by night," John makes a point in saying. He was there to learn but only left confused.

First, Jesus seems to spring on him the enigma, "you cannot see the realm of God unless you are born again or anew or from above." Now that doesn't make sense, Nicodemus responded. I have obviously grown old, how can I be born again. I sure cannot enter again in my mother's womb." Then, Jesus says something about being born of the Spirit. Nicodemus is confused: "What on earth is he talking about?" Then, as if this would help, Jesus adds, "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 is going. So it is with any one born of the spirit." And Nicodemus, totally bewildered by now, says, "How can these things be?" And Jesus doesn't bail him out, only saying, "You are teacher but still you don't understand these things." Nicodemus, I assume, left this weird conversation scratching his head. I don't get it. I don't get what Jesus was saying.

Well, Nicodemus was in good company. Most everyone didn't get it. Everyone was confused about Jesus and his teachings. They went around scratching their heads in bewilderment --- and eventually in anger.

Other Pharisees as keepers of the Law, the guardians of purity, defining those who are in and who are out, didn't get it. To them Jesus was an enigma. He claimed to be a rabbi and yet ate with sinners, that is, those who were deemed impure, the lepers, the prostitutes, the tax collectors like Zaccheus. And he claimed to be a prophet of God, even the Messiah. Made no sense at all.

The scribes, the theologians of the day, didn't understand Jesus. When they put Jesus to test with --- what are the great commandments --- Jesus responded with a story about a half-Jew, a despised member of another race, a Samaritan who illustrates the Jewish commandment to love your neighbor as you love yourself. Crazy thinking, they concluded. A heretic, blaspheming the Law of God.

The priests of the Temple never understood Jesus. Why would he drive out the exchangers of money, the very ones who made sacrificing animals in the temple possible? Made no sense. It was offensive. It was sacrilegious. He must be crazy, a light that glares, a light to be snuffed out.

Pilate and the Roman authorities were puzzled by Jesus. He came announcing a kingdom or realm of God, yet entered Jerusalem triumphantly on a donkey. He stood before Pilate claiming powers he didn't call upon in self-defense. Reluctantly and scratching his head in bewilderment, Pilate turns Jesus over to the will of the angry mob.

And even the disciples didn't get Jesus. They kept misunderstanding him. With all the time they enjoyed with him, yet they keep missing the intent of his message. James and John wanted the top seats in his kingdom, forcing a sit down lesson by Jesus on great leadership as the willingness to serve, not be served. And Peter, even toward the end, resisted Jesus, his teacher, washing his feet as if he were but a household servant.

Now, this is what they missed, as I understand it. Jesus was teaching and embodying another **way of power**. It was assumed in Jesus' world that some dominated others, that some rightfully had the power to control others, by force if necessary. That's the way the world works, it was assumed: religious leaders, the Pharisees controlled who was pure and who was impure, who was in good standing and who was not. The theological leaders took responsibility in interpreting and defining God. The temple priests must protect, with power, the sacrificial system that gave them status. Husbands understood wives to be their property. Certainly the Romans, as conquerors, must protect their empire with power, violent power if necessary.

But Jesus came along with a different concept of power --- power with, not power over; relational power, not coercive power; non-violent power, not violent power; collaborate power, not controlling power. Don't you see this tread in all that Jesus taught: loving enemies, forgiving seventy times seven; blessed are the meek, the poor, leadership is service; be about peacemaking; be compassionate as God is compassionate. Even more, he embodied, incarnated this relational, non-violent power. Note his relationships with persons of every rank from Nicodemus to the widow with a mite; his table fellowship with outcasts; his treatment of women as equals; his embrace of children as members of the kingdom; relating to his disciples as friends; his relating across borders like the Samaritan woman at the well; in the face of his enemies violence, his praying for their forgiveness.

Do you see the theme --- another kind of power? Amazing, the Son of God, the chosen one of God, the embodiment of God's will, one who, in Paul's words, emptied himself of over- under authority and humbled himself as a servant. He put a face to power- with, empowering presence, not power-over, coercive and dominating. That's so radical, well, it's like being born again, its like being blind, and suddenly seeing, it's like being dead and coming alive. It's the wind that blows from a surprising direction.

I didn't get it. I had no clue that something was wrong, that there was an imbalance of power. As I was growing up, Stacey, Helen and Margaret --- all African-Americans --- worked in my home. But did I know their children? Did we cover their health insurance and contribute toward their retirement? Did it bother me that they always rode in the back seat and when on the bus went to the back in the Negro section? No. I assumed they were happy that way. Every body had their place and it was good. Then, Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement came along. More to the point, I found some black friends. They opened my eyes to my white supremacy, helping me see that the power arrangements worked to my favor, not to theirs. They helped me reach for another kind of power, relational power, a just power arrangement. Even since I have been a recovering racist.

I didn't get it. I had no clue that something was wrong when Janice and I married, beginning with the assumption inherited from my parents --- husband the bread winner and wife the keeper of the home. Major decisions were mine to make. Well ... when the *Feminine Mystique* came off the press, Janice came off her inferior position. She wanted the freedom to

choose her vocation. She wanted equal share in decision making. She wanted partnership, shared power. Ever since I have been a recovering sexist.

You get the drift, how what I assumed as the way things were also worked to my advantage. I couldn't see the difference in power until it was painfully pointed out to me. The same kind of awakening to this oppressive imbalance of power came when I realized that homosexual persons didn't choose their sexual orientation and that they didn't prefer "living in the closet;" or when I realized the way I was living my life brought harm to the earth and other non-human beings; or when I realized that Jews and Muslims are discounted when we assume the superiority of Christianity; or when other nations don't appreciate our benevolent enforcement of what we regard as best for the world.

How relevant Jesus is to our time. Don't you see the movement here and there, now and then from power over to power with, from domination to partnership? I know, the evidence of dominating, violent power is rampant. We have just completed the most violent century ever. Yet, I see --- and I invite you to see --- evidence of the Spirit at work in Jesus alive and still at work in our day. I see shifts that value partnerships --- couples desiring partnership in the place of one controlling the other; partnerships in work settings replaced one or two controlling; the shared power in groups reaching beyond their comfort zone working together in common cause. I see this shift in power arrangements as people seek just relationships across the divides of gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, nations, class and age. I see this movement in the hunger for authentic democracy and in the programs for training in non-violent problem-solving and restorative justice. I detect this shift in our increased awareness of interdependence from which more voices are declaring our oneness with all of creation. By sight, I observe these movements; by faith, I believe they are the God revealed in Jesus at work in our world. They are the wind, the Spirit blowing.

This shift in our use of power can be costly. It is Lenten season. We are on the annual journey to Jerusalem, to the cross. Once again we see laid bare the cost of Jesus' refusal to return violence for violence. We watch Jesus, even at the cost of his life, refuse to counter coercive, dominating power and choose instead to love, forgive in return. It remains costly to replace the way of over-under control with the way of partnership and shared power. It's the way of the cross.

But Easter is coming. Easter declares that the non-violent love of God in Jesus cannot be defeated. Easter announces that inclusive, cross-the-barriers grace in Jesus cannot be stopped by death. Easter proclaims the good news that the life of Jesus rises to live in and through us. Easter calls the church to embody literally (be the body of Christ) the Jesus way of relational power.

This, I suggest, is the mysterious Wind that Jesus was talking about with Nicodemus. It is the Spirit that still blows --- and if we choose, we can lift up our sails, once again, to catch that Wind.