

The Second Sunday of Lent  
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Jn 3: 1-17

### Breaking Free

John's Gospel is a fascinating text. I would consider it in many ways a literary masterpiece. You see this especially in its presentation of Jesus. The Gospel depicts a Jesus who confronts those caught in this world with God's world, and this confrontation provokes a crisis. You have to choose which world in which you'll live. One way that John's Gospel develops this through its literary technique is apparent in the way that Jesus enters a conversation. It's often as if he's talking to someone else. So today, Nicodemus tells Jesus, "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." Jesus responds, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." I wonder if Nicodemus didn't look around to see if Jesus had one of those cell phone attachments in his ear. Jesus was looking at him, but he sure didn't seem to be talking to him. It's not clear that Jesus made any sense to Nicodemus at all.

That struck me, in part because it resonated with my experience from last week a bit, though then I was on the other side of it. I enjoyed our instructed Eucharist last Sunday, but at the end, when I talked about how we are taken, blessed, broken and shared, even as Jesus was, I got some quizzical looks. There seemed to be a disconnect. I wondered if I made sense. Or if what I had said made sense. What do people hear when I say that it's a part of God's plan that we are broken?

I realize that there is so much in this world that breaks us—age and disease, war and violence, abuse in our families, emotional struggles, the loss of loved ones. There is so much that breaks us. As I reflected, I was clear that I don't want to say that God breaks us with these things. It's not that God sends disease or violence or takes our partners, our parents, our children.... The world does that. In Jesus God joins us in that brokenness—that's what happens on the cross. God doesn't intend this kind of suffering that overtakes us—God shares it.

But there is another kind of brokenness—another kind of breaking. Things can be broken up, destroyed. That's the kind of breaking that I just talked about. But things can also be broken out, freed, liberated, allowed to escape. This is that kind of breaking that the Eucharist refers us to when I say that there God takes and breaks us. It's a breaking that is a liberation, a freeing so that we can be poured out in love to the world.

That sounds like more fun, doesn't it? Breaking out, being liberated---it makes me want to sing Freebird. The thing is, it's still a breaking, and from all I know and all that I've seen, it's still painful. What's broken out is the soul, but what's broken open is the ego—or better, our egocentrism... That can mean so many things. To be egocentric is to see yourself as the center of the universe, so that everything is about us. It can mean constantly having to prove yourself, prove yourself trustworthy. It's the concern, am I

good enough, so that everything becomes an opportunity to prove yourself good enough. This dynamic traps us. It traps our soul. It's good to have an ego, but our ego shouldn't stand at the center of the solar system. It should orbit with all of God's creatures around God at the center.

God put us in a graceful world and surrounded us with love. Even more, we are surrounded with opportunities to love, which are so much richer. But we lost this—we lose track of it and not see it when we are trapped in our egos. We miss the grace when we are bound in our ego's anxiety. We miss the love when we are caught by our ego's unworthiness. We miss the opportunities to love when we are entranced by our opportunities to build up or console our egos. So if God is to open us to grace, to love, then God must first break open our egos. And that is painful, because we think that we are these egos—we don't recognize them as masks of our own making.

This week I finished my grading for my Church History class. It's good to be done, but I forgot, in the midst of the busyness, that you get your course evaluations at VTS once you're done grading. In the past, I've been considered a pretty good teacher at the seminary. I liked the students, they liked me, and we had a good time. So I've generally looked forward to the evaluations, and I looked forward to this set. But when I opened them and began to read, my eyes widened and my shoulders slumped. They didn't like me much, it seemed. I don't know what it was. I didn't have as much time to spend with them out of class. I was exhausted by a new baby. I've always been somewhat of a tough grader. When you give folks that you've graded a place for anonymous feedback, they can, at times, be mean. Comments like, "This was the worst course ever," or "The professor didn't really try." They picked at much that I did.

It was painful. So I got mad, then I doubted myself. Then I got mad again, then I was stoic. Then mad again. I got mad at least 17 or 18 times. Of course it hurt, but even more it pricked the bubble of my ego. It took away a part of my self-definition, a part of what made me worthy. It broke me a little. But I also wonder if it didn't free me a little...

Jesus told Nicodemus that to enter the kingdom, to be give the freedom of the Spirit, you must be born again—born from above. That's such a positive, affirming metaphor. New Life, New Beginnings. It's easy to lose the pain implicit in the metaphor. Birth is painful. It's painful for the one giving birth; we see that spiritually in the cross, as Jesus gives birth to new life in us. But we forget that it's also painful for the newborn. They can't describe it for us, but you can see the look on their face. Think about it: There you are in a soft, cozy place with all of your needs met, surrounded by love, then, Boom. You get shoved out into a loud noisy world, and your head gets all squished in the process.

It's a little like the pricking of my ego, that warm, cozy space I had made for myself—I was the teacher that the students loved—and the, Boom. Now my ego does feel a little squished, and the worlds not so cozy. But do I have a new freedom? Will this pricking, the breaking really be a new birth? Will I spend less time concerned with my ego and more time simply being with my family, with you, with whomever God brings me? Can I simply appreciate what's good around me and love whoever is near me and not worry

how that credentials me for the next step in my life? Can I let God pour me out into the world?

I'm not sure what you do with this. You didn't just get back bad course evaluations, though maybe your ego's been pricked in other ways. I guess I wonder about finding way to make ourselves more available to the grace, the love, an the opportunities to love that surround us. To not be trapped by our egos and all that they demand.

Amen