



*Something to Work With*

March 8, 2020

Second Sunday in Lent

Romans 5:1-5; John 3:1-17

The Rev. Dr. Seth E. Weeldreyer

Dr. Amy-Jill Levine will give our Briner Lecture next Sunday. She humorously recalls when she was a child, she wanted to be pope. She remembers watching the funeral of Pope John XXIII, asking her mother, “Who was that man?” She knew very little about him, but learned from television he lived in Italy, had a very nice white suit and great hat, and everyone seemed to love him. Like most Jewish parents, Amy-Jill’s mother knew of John XXIII’s efforts while a Cardinal to save Jews during World War II. And he convened Vatican II that finally condemned teaching that all Jews everywhere were to blame for Jesus’ crucifixion. “He was good for the Jews,” her mother affirmed. That did it. She decided to be pope. It meant lots of spaghetti, great accessories, and the job was good for the Jews. “You can’t be,” her mother replied. “You’re not Italian.” “Clearly,” Amy-Jill concludes, “for many reasons, I desperately needed instruction about the relationship between church and synagogue. My parents explained that we used the same Bible, but what we read on Hebrew scrolls Christians read from English books. And Christians thought a Jewish man named Jesus was very important. Later, I learned, painfully, that separation between synagogue and church is much more complicated.”<sup>i</sup>

Dr. Levine has made studying and teaching about Jesus a major part of her exceptional life’s work. She’s motivated in part to nurture stronger relations between Jews and Christians. You see, she notes that studying Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Paul and others in their time, nurtures her own Judaism—its diverse teachings, rich encounter with the divine, historic struggles in the Roman world.

She even finds “inspirational, the message of the kingdom of heaven ... [a] time all debts are forgiven and when those who have willingly give, without thought of reciprocity, to those who need: a time when we no longer ask, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ but ‘Who acts as neighbor?’; [and] prioritize serving rather than being served. But as much as I admire the message,” Levine clarifies, “I do not worship the messenger.” Rather, as we read in class this week, she remains fulfilled in practices of her Jewish tradition. Likewise, by seeing Jesus as a Jew in belief and practice, she asserts, we develop deeper living faith as Christians. Anyone can study, discuss, and develop an impression of Jesus. And some find Jesus speaks to them personally, spiritually, I dare add divinely. I love her quip about students who read the text and defer “the Holy Spirit guides me.” Yes, she replies, “And give the Holy Spirit something to work with.”<sup>ii</sup>

I can't wait to be her student next weekend! I'm eager to have relationship with Jesus and inspiration to live his way empowered by our encounter! It makes me think, as some of us have pondered: what makes our devotion to Christ different, more than admiration for a good person? Let's be clear. I respect Amy-Jill Levine for her excellent scholarship. I honor her devoted practice of Judaism through which she knows God intimately. I've no interest in converting her. I'm deeply grateful for her integrity and respect for ours to the point that when she fills this pulpit next Sunday she's clarified she won't read the Bible. She knows well Jesus and the woman at the well. Yet, you see, she does not presume to proclaim the Christian gospel. Wow. Yes, I thought. A little detail, that gets at the heart of all we do.

Whatever we know about Jesus of Nazareth, do we believe the gospel of God's love revealed in him—Divine Grace we receive, Holy Power to redeem, Sacred purpose we keep living?

That's why John writes his gospel—this story of Nicodemus and Jesus. Toward the end, John says: he writes all of these signs so we may come to believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing we share life in Christ's name. Nicodemus has seen some signs. He knows something about Jesus, even glimpses the presence of Holy Love in him. Yet, he's ambivalent, still in the dark, light of faith in Christ not yet kindled within. Jesus catches that catch in his heart. No one really knows / shares God's reign, Jesus says, without being born from above, or anew.

Now John's writing style drips with double meaning, layered metaphor. Scholars jest that in John's gospel, Jesus seems inherently unable to give a straight answer! Sure enough, Nicodemus gets lost in literal biological impossibilities. Jesus clarifies it's all about life flowing from God's Spirit. Nic's like: "Wait, what?" And Jesus is like: "Come on, dude, give me something to work with!" Can we catch the hint of Hebrew humor? Then, Jesus riffs into soliloquy leading to a most memorized verse, posterized for pro sports or billboards, movingly sung to stir our hearts. "God so loved the world ..." In the beginning, John says, Holy Love created all of life. Jesus calls us to serve that Love, as abundant as wine at a wedding feast, as bold as turning over tables in the Temple. Now, as John keeps telling the Jesus story, it's like he says: *Hello! This is it!* God so loves! Do we get it?! Do we give our hearts to it?

Friends, I've got to admit. This text hasn't always turned on the light of Holy Love inside me. How it's used—the spirit swirling around it, condemning tone conveyed through it. Ironically, John states: God so loves and sends Jesus not to condemn; to save. Later lines do criticize Jews who don't accept the light of Christ. And that's when we need to know John's gospel is written when synagogue and early church didn't get along. Lots of conflict, reciprocal condemnation. So, John makes "the Jews" look bad. As if we fought with St. Luke's or Methodist or UCC neighbors,

posterized for all posterity. It's the twisted basis for all the blame and bullying of Jews over centuries that Amy-Jill learned Pope John XXIII condemned.

Here's the thing about Nicodemus. For John, his choice is the one we all face in getting to know Jesus, seeking Holy Love, serving him and living abundantly with joy and peace. Nic reappears in John's gospel maybe reminding us of the faith question before us. He defends Jesus in the Sanhedrin, the most powerful religious leaders who want to condemn Jesus. Then at the end, he joins in burying Jesus' body—with a hundred pounds of spices and aloe! Is that devotion or punctuation of the fact this guy is gone? I wonder. John seems to leave outcome of Nicodemus' faith as an open question. Maybe because we are left to answer it.

I've been there with Nicodemus. In the dark. Cloaking my faith from others, or fear there's a lack thereof. Baffled, bothered by some expressions like stuff about being "born again." Exploring, probing ... still times when things don't make sense, when I want to say, to cry: if God is love more powerful than all else, then why?!! And friends, I guess I'm still here trying to proclaim good news, because I've found life in Christ. I've received it—light in the darkness. In this church as a kid from the time you held me; love of family; voices of friends. In places and visions for faith like Iona; many ways we live together. Whatever I work out in my mind or not, I still trust—I give my heart to—God's loving presence and power, the promise that nothing in life or death will separate me or you from that love in Christ Jesus.

Friends, I want other people to know that life, as well. To be comforted when alone or afraid. To be guided when lost, to be empowered when feeling low, to be filled with true joy, gratitude, peace as we live with grace and purpose. We aren't perfect in this church. Still, despite our foibles and failings, Sacred Life and Love seems pretty evident. So, I'm sad when people remain suspect or even reject Christianity, life in Christ like we share. Again, I don't criticize people who find other

meaningful practices and companions with whom to share the Sacred at the Center of life, the Ground of Being, whatever we call God. I lament when people hear messages of judgment or fear and think: if that's what Jesus Christ and Christianity is all about, it's not me. Especially when people are in a place of darkness, trouble, needing hope.

You've shared that desire and concern with me. For people you love—family and friends. For our society and world. Seems I've heard it a lot recently. Thus, this sermon ... just trying to listen to the Spirit speaking. This past week, several members and former members who baptized children here talked about that journey in their own life right now. Wanting to give a centered grounding in love and moral vision to their children. Processing past experiences, current questions. Looking for a way, truth, life that not only makes some sense, but makes us get up in the morning, find peace amid change and hardship, feel energized to live for something bigger than our selves. Nicodemus or Nicodema, all of us.

I wonder what keeps us from fully grasping who Jesus is—how God is in him. How spiritual rebirth can be limited by signs or assumptions that shape our minds; desires, distractions that grip our hearts. That's something all of us ask and answer for ourselves. You see, friends, if we're honest to God, conversion can't be forced. That's what Nicodemus faces. That's what John's gospel proclaims. Conversion—giving our lives to God. Defining what we see in the mirror and far beneath skin-deep by Divine Love more than anything else. Desiring Grace. Dedicating all we have and say and do for Holy Purpose. If it all remains mental exercise, it can be interesting, maybe even enriching. And if it's living faith, it's about giving our heart. Loving as he did. Serving as he did.

In our living rooms or churches, in retreat centers and ordinary places, people can develop an impression of Jesus. For those longing to have Jesus speak to them

personally, Amy-Jill Levine urges, *give the Spirit something to work with*. She means investing in study—learning about historical background, details of scripture, especially considering Jesus as a Jew.<sup>iii</sup> I agree. And I suspect, Levine might agree that in the end it all leads to something more, something deeper. That's what Paul tries to express to earliest followers of Jesus in Rome. Closeness with God, peace, hope, enduring amid suffering, faithful character, grace ... it's the journey, the process, the work of being born again, spiritually—the truest core of what's Sacred come alive in us, flowing through us. Not biological impossibilities of adults as infants kicking mommy's tummy again (can we chuckle with ancient Jews). It's like being enveloped in the Holy One's womb. All made real, Paul stresses, as Divine Love gets poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

For God so loves the world ... God pours Divine Love in Christ into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, flowing through us, bursting from us like a fountain, pooling among us to nurture life beneath the surface and reflect beauties ever before and all round us. I love that image. I can get like John and play with layered metaphor a while! Friends, here's the truth Jesus tried to tell Nicodemus, the reality we all face about conversion, living faith. *The more we invest, we open our hearts to give, to be vulnerable, to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor ... then the more grace we'll receive*. We'll believe, we'll be saved as Jesus says, sharing abundant life in him, observing beauties and possibilities amid realities of our world. Grace in which we stand, Paul says—literally I suppose and in the great lineage of living faith in Christ we inherit.

The way I see the signs, God's always pouring out love—like water into the font, juice into the cup, waterfalls of Yosemite to irrigate our world in need, or a daily shower of mercy, forgiveness to cleanse us as we are. Friends, here are signs and wonders I've seen in you, light in darkness. Let me testify to what I know! We call a friend we haven't talked with in a while, or contact someone with whom we've

known conflict. We visit someone we know in need and stay connected in care and practical ways with others across an ocean. We pull out old books that moved us, or new ones to savor. We take walks—daily routes and longer ones for more like a week together—talking about people we love, things we do or dream, news we hear, things we fear. We come to class discussions. We sing in choir or simply slip into a pew so we're not alone. We speak out about concerns we share. We serve meals, we work in a garden, we chat with children who need love, affirmation, someone who simply cares as much tutoring about words or whatever. We pray and journal and make time for creativity with clay or brushes or pens on paper, or sandpaper and varnish on old wooden boats. We go to places that move us, where the veil between heaven and earth feels thin. For me it's places like Iona or this sanctuary or beautiful vistas or city streets teeming with so many varieties of people ... I wonder what it is for you. We're honest with our questions. We're earnest about our quest for living faith.

We give the Spirit something to work with. The sweet, sweet Spirit in this place, and everywhere moving over waters, sweeping through deserts, singing in Jesus' old stable, calling us from tomorrow.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted and abridged from Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: the Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 1.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*, 6-8.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*, 7.