

Lent 2, Year A
John 3:1-17
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Midway through the second act of *The Fantasticks* Hucklebee and Bellamy sing a tune called *Plant a Radish*, extolling the virtues of vegetable gardens. It goes in part “Plant a carrot, get a carrot, not a brussel sprout. That’s why I love vegetables, you know what you’re about.” This refrain provides a significant interpretive principle for understanding what is going on in that rather strange conversation we just heard between Jesus and Nicodemus. The principle is simply this: like produces like. Just as carrots produce carrots and only carrots, so flesh produces flesh and only flesh, and spirit produces spirit and only spirit. This is what John means when his Jesus says: “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” In the next few minutes I want to suggest what I believe St. John means by this, and why it should matter at all to us here today.

I must begin before the beginning. In John’s gospel the contrast between spirit and flesh is not a contrast between something good and something evil. The prologue to his gospel makes it clear that John accepts completely a central point of the creation story of Genesis one that all creation is good. It came to be from and through God, and because of that it is good, flesh and spirit both. To make sure we understand that he tells us that “The Word became flesh and

dwelt among us.” Flesh is a fit vehicle for the Word which is not just from God but is God.

Nor is he arguing that some people are flesh and some spirit, some people are destined to be the elect of God and some shut out forever. The last two sentences of this passage foreclose that idea when he writes “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Then, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Everyone is flesh; all creation originates in flesh, but because of what God has done in Christ it is now possible to be reoriginated, reborn as something new, as spirit. It is not that flesh changes into something different. Plant a carrot, get a carrot. It is that flesh dies, and then by the grace of God is reborn as spirit.

So the real contrast between flesh and spirit is not that the one is bad and the other good, or that flesh is for some people and spirit for others. It is that flesh is grounded in itself, in things, in stuff, and spirit is grounded in God. Therefore flesh tries to find its own true self in what is less than ultimate, what in fact is passing away, and so it is ceaselessly struggling to get a grip on that which in the end disappears. That is incredibly frustrating. Spirit is grounded in God, and finds its own true self in that which is ultimate, which does last, which never disappears.

That is what makes this passage important for us. For like Nicodemus we are grounded in stuff, and try to determine who we are and why we matter on the basis of it. We can trot out the usual suspects, of money, place in society, power, family, and so forth, and we can realize that we do indeed try to find ourselves in them, but I think it is even broader than that. I am grounded in being a citizen of the United States of America, for example, I am grounded in being Christian. That last one is particularly significant because it is so easy to imagine that being grounded in being a Christian is being grounded in God. There is perhaps a sense in which that is true, but mostly the way we are grounded in being Christian is itself quite “fleshly” if that is a word.

What I mean by that is that on the rare occasions when I am completely honest with myself what I discover is that being grounded in being a Christian really means I am grounded not just in a particular way of acting in this world, but in a particular way of thinking about God and religion, a way of thinking about God that is in constant flux, and which will quite possibly not even last as long as my life time.

When my dad went to seminary at Church Divinity School of the Pacific he was trained to believe that the Gospels were really accurate biographies, and that differences between them could and should be reconciled on the historical level. Between 1948 and 1978 that belief got completely blown out of the water, and by the time I got to seminary I was trained to believe that the Gospels were really powerful theology done in the way most theology was done 2,000 years

ago, through story and narrative. The differences therefore were crucial in understanding how they were proclaiming the gospel. That is a hard transition to make, and this is the point. For me, or my father, to stake everything on how to interpret scripture is to live in the flesh. It is to live in something that even now is in flux, even now is passing away. To stake everything on a particular way of being the church is likewise to live in the flesh, for no single way of being the church has ever lasted, and the way we are the church now is itself likewise in flux, likewise passing. We do at times try to shield ourselves from this uncomfortable fact by claiming the Church now is what it has always been, but the truth is that it isn't. From the moment the whole notion of admitting Gentiles without making them become Jews first became an issue the Church has been in flux, ever changing, ever adapting to new circumstances. So to try and find one's true self in a particular way of being the church, of believing, and to insist that this is the only place to find ones self, is to live in the flesh. It is to try and find what is eternal in that which is even now passing away.

No one can simply decide to give all this up and to find life somewhere else. Plant a carrot, get a carrot, and that is what we are, carrots, metaphorically. We can't help but try to find ourselves in what is finite, mortal, limited and thus passing away. No matter how we try to twist it, no matter how "spiritual" we try to become, in the end we all end up back where we started, in a way of being that seeks its truest, highest self in stuff. That is why in order to receive the kind of life God would have us live, a life here in this passage called "spirit" we have

to be born in a different way than we were the first time. We can't get there on our own, so we must receive it as a gift.

This means quite simply that we must die to every means by which we define ourselves and what is important about us in the terms of this world that is passing away. We must abandon the notion, and the perspective that emerges from that notion, that we find our own true and deepest selves in what we do, control, believe, own. We must even give up finding ourselves in the particular way we think about God, for that way of thinking is passing away, even as we ourselves are. Then, when every means of knowing ourselves and where we belong is finally dead, there will remain only God, whom we cannot control, cannot use, cannot own, and certainly cannot understand. And then we will know what it means to be reborn, for we will have received from God an entirely new origin, and origin that John calls "spirit." And we will define ourselves not in terms of who we are and what we do and control, but entirely in terms of who God is, and the love God has for all creation.

That will change us all. For once reborn we will all see as we have never seen before, that our true selves are not found in the "flesh" and neither is anyone else's. Once reborn we will be able to see the absolute oneness of all creation, which is something the "flesh" cannot see at all. For the flesh is too busy finding itself in stuff, and so values all the differences in the stuff, and sees in the differences in all the stuff what makes us important or unimportant, valuable or valueless. The "Spirit" is dead to that, and so sees completely

beyond it, to that point where the only source of self, ours or anyone else's, is God. It is a whole different way of being in this world, one which is not mine, I hasten to add, but which I have glimpsed. It creates as well not a sense of satisfaction with a private relationship with God, but rather a sense of responsibility and interdependence with and for all of creation.

Jesus displayed that life of the Spirit not simply in what he did, but in what he was, one grounded completely in the life of God, one who saw both his origin and his destiny in God. That same origin, and that same destiny is his gift to us.

