

Sermon – 2nd Lent
John 3:1-17
March 12, 2017

“Seeing the Father Again”

The visit of Nicodemus and Jesus took place *“in the dark.”* That’s not an incidental point, because the story is about a man who *“sees God his father”* by way of Jesus, who John earlier in his gospel says *“was the light that enlightens everyone.”* Nicodemus was a good “son of Israel”, a Pharisee - devout beyond a shadow of a doubt. His campfire conversation with Jesus however became his conversion – not so much of belief in or love of God but of understanding God, whom he would come to call his Father because Jesus did. Allow me to share a personal story about a son (me) and my dad.

Like Nicodemus with Jesus, a conversation I had with my dad over 20 years ago changed how I saw my father, by then a man of 80 years. It was a renewal of sorts between us...and therefore a good moment – a very good one for me at least. My father was my hero growing up (well, him and Minnesota Twins slugger Harmon Killebrew). When he came home in the evening from work at the meat market he and his brother owned, I was excited as could be, all the more on those nights when mom (for reasons that then as now escape me) was on the warpath. His arrival meant one thing - the cessation of hostilities. My brother and sister and I would wink at each other with smiles on our faces that harmonized *“whew...dads home”!*

But alas I grew up and with that growing up...dad changed. Translation - I went from being ten to being a teen. Instead of being my *“man of the hour”* dad became to me at least the *“invisible man”*. I remembered him fondly when I needed to borrow the keys to the family LeSabre - tank topped off by his money of course. I played baseball and dad liked to watch me, but his butcher shop was small and these big 24/7 supermarkets were springing up all over in the 70’s –a fact of business that usually kept him at the shop and away from my games. But in the summer of “77”, my final year of legion ball, he came a bit more. That summer I was voted team MVP. I got a call one night at the end of the season inviting me to a banquet honoring all legion team MVP’s. That Dad would have been thrilled to attend was a no-brainer for me...but I told him it was for players and coaches only. It wasn’t of course. To this day I wish I hadn’t done that.

By the late 70’s my dad the butcher man was approaching 70 while I was boning up on college classes and, ahem, “college life”. *“How are the classes going Ken...anything interesting”* he’d occasionally ask. *“Yeah dad, a few are. But I gotta get going...see you around”*. When I graduated and entered the accounting profession, I think he thought I’d settle down and we’d settle back into a relationship. A few years into that career though I broke his heart when one day in the very living room where so many conversations over the last 10 years *hadn’t* happened...I had one where I told him I was going to Africa to be a missionary. Dad – a survivor of the Great Depression and World War II - didn’t think leaving a good job and home for nice but unnecessary things like mission work was a such a hot idea.

About a week later my sister called and said *“Ken, you gotta talk to dad – mom says he hasn’t slept for a week...he doesn’t know why you’re leaving them like this.”* So we went to breakfast on a rainy Saturday morning. The raindrops outside were warmer and more plentiful than the conversation inside as I recall. He said *“is there something your mother and I have done”* way more often than I cared to hear. I didn’t understand that was how dad was saying he loved me.

Three years overseas came and went. Near the end of our first home leave and with another awkward goodbye in the offing, something inside of me said I needed to visit with dad. The Spirit blows where it wills I guess. We went to breakfast at the same café as three years earlier. The food wasn't much better nor was the conversation much livelier. But then that something inside of me told me to invite him in to our apartment. *"Listen Dad, we'll be alright...this next term is only two years...then Marcella and I will probably come back for good"*. He paused...and asked a dad question; *"does the church pay you enough...you used to be a CPA you know"* *"Yeah dad, they pay us alright. We even saved some money from our first term....you know there's not a lot of things to waste money on in Tanzania.* So I showed him a pay stub and a savings account statement. *"Say, that's real good...I'm glad to see that. Not that your mother and I were worried or anything, just wondering if you needed a little help."* A little help...from an 80 year old man whose IRA was exhausted and whose social security checks were less than what a missionary got paid.

Then I got all emotional and I knew he did too cause he immediately looked the other way. And we started talking about "stuff". His health, moms, even if Marcella and I ever thought about having kids (nah!). We talked the rest of the morning away. I returned to Tanzania for two years...then turned that savings into a down payment on a house and enrolled in the preacher factory called Luther Seminary. On a Saturday in November near the end of our first year back he helped me with some work around that house. The following Monday he was coming over to finish. But on Sunday...he died. The following Friday I buried my father...not a stranger, and that was pretty good.

Our lesson today from John is in many respects just a conversation. But after it, or more likely because of it, Nicodemus began to see his heavenly Father differently. He'd come for all the children of Israel that night. *"Teacher, WE know that you come from God"* he said. We, this people Israel sired by the grace of God. God and Israel is what this nocturnal conversation was all about. The children had drifted...seriously. In their infancy, when Moses was with them, God was their hero, strong and mighty, delivering them *"with a mighty hand and outstretched arm"* their Psalm writers loved to say. But then Israel grew up, crowned their own kings and made their own decisions. Nicodemus knew all about that. One night one child of Israel saw how God was going to heal that.

Nicodemus was "re-born." A year or so later...Jesus was dead. Nicodemus helped bury him. But he buried a Savior, not a stranger, and that was good. We tend to think of rebirth as the state of affairs within us. But according to John, rebirth is not simply what happens inside of us but what happens between God and us. Jesus, so says John 1:11 came to mend the sad state of affairs John describes by saying *"He (God) came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."* It's easier for me these days to imagine how that can make a father feel.

May I close with a word to you who are or will be fathers? Be patient with your children. Be as godly with them as you are given the faith to be. There may come a day when they'll drift from you, maybe for a period longer than you're comfortable. So speak to your children about your faith – about your heavenly father and theirs - and they will never forget you. Your children will see you, perhaps as they have not seen you before. And God promises that will be good. AMEN