

How Can These Things Be?

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My Hero

Billy Collins

Just as the hare is zipping across the finish line,
the tortoise has stopped once again by the roadside,
this time to stick out his neck and nibble a bit of sweet grass,
unlike the previous time when he was distracted
by a bee humming in the heart of a wildflower.

Chinese Proverb

When there is light in the soul,
there is beauty in the person.
When there is beauty in the person,
there is harmony in the home.
When there is harmony in the home,
there is honor in the nation.
When there is honor in the nation,
there is peace in the world.

John 3: 1-09

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “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 answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kin-dom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kin-dom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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 goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

“The Spirit moves where it wants to” just like the tortoise in “My Hero.” Nicodemus could tell that Jesus was onto something that he himself could not grasp. Nicodemus wants to know what Jesus knows. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born of the Spirit as well as the water. Nicodemus is looking for a new hero.

One way that Jesus taught his followers how to cultivate soul-centered awareness was through a new understanding of the commandments, a new practice to learn and follow. When Jesus is asked which is the greatest commandment, he replies by bringing two old commandments together into a new relationship:

Love God, with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

The commandments themselves are not new. They are a part of the vision that Moses brought to the edge of the wilderness and the entrance into the Promised Land. They were passed on, generation to generation, seeking to make a dwelling place for the Indwelling Spirit; seeking to make the Spirit a place to dwell, to abide. Jesus is trying to awaken a people who have forgotten that the purpose of the law is not a matter of believing; it's a matter of be-loving.

A local example of this “law” comes from the mission statement of Silicon Valley Progressive Faith Community, a new UCC church in San Jose: “It’s not what you believe, it’s how you love.” We are called to be loving in a place where our heart can take courage, to be loving in a place where love of God, neighbor, and self are all balanced. Loving the Holy One with everything we’ve got, and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves is hard work, but it’s good work, and you can get it. And that is another reason why the church community is the place to go to learn what it means to be with God.

Jesus showed what is possible for humanity when we give everything we’ve got to God. The Spirit working through the disciples of Jesus showed what is possible in community when we hold all things in common. We need a Sanctuary such as this in order to be human, and to remember and cherish our intimate relationship with all of creation, all creatures, plants, cultures, and religions. We need a Sanctuary such as this to discover a humility that reminds us that the Spirit is the center of the universe – not us, not Christianity, not the United States, and not persons of white European ancestry. We need a Sanctuary such as this to feel a power beyond ourselves that holds us together in strength and wisdom and heart and soul, and that supports us in that small place in the world that we can touch with compassion.

I found a little story that brings this all together in a powerful way. Sherman Rogers wrote a book about leadership. He told about spending a summer in a logging camp in Idaho. The superintendent had to leave the camp for a few days, and left Rogers in charge. Rogers was anxious, because he was young, and the men were tough. In particular, he was worried about Tony, a difficult, sullen man. Rogers said, "What do I do if someone refuses my orders?" The superintendent said, "Fire him." Then the superintendent said, "I suppose you will fire Tony." Rogers admitted that the thought had crossed his mind. The superintendent said, "I would be sorry to see that. I have been logging for forty years. Tony is the most reliable worker we have. He complains a lot, but there hasn't been an accident on his hill for eight years." Hearing that left Rogers in a dilemma. What should I do? he wondered. (Love God with everything I've got? Love my co-worker as myself?) Rogers decided to talk to Tony. He sought him out, and said, "Tony, I'm in charge here." Tony grunted. Rogers continued, "I was going to fire you the first time you caused me trouble, but I have changed my mind." Then he told Tony what the superintendent had said. As Rogers finished, Tony dropped his shovel, and tears ran down his cheeks. He said, "Why didn't he tell me that years ago?" At the end of the day, one of the men said, "Did you see Tony? He did enough work for twelve men and he actually smiled at me." Just then, Tony walked up and invited Rogers for dinner. That evening, Rogers

found Tony to be a kind and loving father whose children adored him. Tony said, "Today I tell Maria that you the first foreman in this country who say, 'Good job, Tony.' It make Maria feel like Christmas." Twelve years later, Rogers met Tony again, this time in California, where Tony had become a superintendent himself. Rogers asked him the secret of his success. Tony said, "You are! If it not be for the one minute you talk to me in Idaho, I kill somebody some day. That one minute change my life."

In that moment of receiving love, Tony is reborn. In the midst of our lives together there will be moments of blessing and there will be moments of frustration. In all those moments we do well to remember what called us here in the first place. Some spirit was calling us. Some voice was sharing a dream that we could understand. Some one invited us into a dwelling place for people who seek to balance love of the Holy One with love of neighbor and self.

It is hard work, but it's good work, and you can get it in this place of mutual support. We each have individual pathways that brought us to this place, and individual gifts and questions to share. This Community Congregational Church is a blessing that we are entrusted to care for, to nurture, to grow, and to share so that all people, regardless of gender, race, culture, belief, age or sexual orientation can feel loved and welcomed here.

Born again. Born from heaven and earth. Born from spirit as well as water and dust. What if, being born again, being born from above, means something like re-inventing our culture, re-inventing religion, re-inventing what it means to be a human being, in relationship to one another and our planet? What if being born of the Spirit means creating a Sanctuary for ourselves that is soul-centered, not self-centered? And what would that mean for each person, home, nation, and for the world in these times that we are living in? Can I bring peace into my relationships *with prayer* that opens me to the Spirit that is beyond my imagination, and with a *practice* that is always asking *how are my words and actions balancing love of God, love of my neighbor, and love of my soul-centered self?*

May an answer and a commitment arise for us as we share our reflections. May an answer and a commitment arise for us as we listen to Scott's musical reflection.