

Fill my Cup, Lord

John 3:1-17

Fill my Cup Lord, I lift it up Lord. Come and quench this thirsting in my soul. Bread from heaven feed me to I want no more. Fill my cup, fill it up, and make me whole.

This hymn is for me this morning Nicodemus' song.

In the gospel reading for this morning we are introduced to Nicodemus for the first time in any of the gospel narratives. In fact Nicodemus is not mentioned in any other Gospel but he does appear on three occasions in this Gospel of John. And the story that is told seems to be one in which Nicodemus comes to Jesus wanting more something, something that he presently does not have. What could have been missing from his life?

From the gospel we know that Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin Council. That meant that not only was he a religious scholar, and a teacher but he was also a member of the influential Jewish court that served as the legal mechanism for resolving civil and criminal conflicts among the Jews. He was learned and he was political. From reading the Talmud, which is the collection of the sacred writings of the Jews, we know that Nicodemus was a very wealthy man who had at least one daughter. So, according to material standards he was not lacking very much. He had money, he had political influence, he had a family and he had religious authority. Yet, it wasn't enough. Under the cover of the night, when the streets would be deserted and no one would be able to witness his coming and going, Nicodemus went to Jesus' room. He could not let himself be seen by anyone because Jesus was considered to have been an enemy of the Jews, at least this is how the religious leaders saw him. He was a threat to their authority and he was a blasphemer. Yet, Nicodemus went to Jesus under the cover of darkness to get something more, something he was missing. Nicodemus wanted to see if he

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could get his cup filled. He had a thirst that was not yet quenched even though it seemed as though he had the best of what the world could offer available to him. Family, money, political authority and the respect of his neighbors were his. Yet he had a thirst.

From the reading in John, the thirst that Nicodemus had seems to have been a spiritual thirst. It doesn't seem to have had a religious thirst. He had his religion, he knew the Hebrew law. He probably followed the commandments as closely as any one could. He went to the Temple on a regular basis. Studied the Torah and the other readings. He was steeped in religion. His problem was not a lack of religion but it was, perhaps, a lack of spirituality. Religion and spirituality is not the same thing, they are not interchangeable words. You can be one without the other. Someone can be religious without being spiritual and someone else could be spiritual without being religious.

Nicodemus was religious. He followed the rules and the letters of the law. He did all the *things* that he was supposed to do. And if someone were to ask him for advice on proper procedure he could probably instruct them with ease. He knew when to bow, when to stand and when to sit. If he were in our church, he would have known when to cross himself, how to properly receive communion and how to respond when the readings came to an end. He probably would be able to tell you what the purpose of the rood screen was and why it was important that reserved sacrament be available in the church. He understood the form of religion and he understood the function of religion. He didn't understand the spirit of it. That's why he

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went to Jesus. That's why he sought Jesus out. He was still thirsting. He wanted to understand the spirit of religion, the spirit of his faith.

What would you say that the spirit of religion is? The spirit of religion is something other than what we can see, smell, taste, hear and feel with our five senses. The spirit of Religion is not the form, its not the practice, its not the doing. It is what lives inside of these practices. The spirit of religion lives inside the Eucahristic event, it is not the Eucharist. The spirit of religion lives inside of the acts we do such as crossing ourselves and bowing or kneeling in reverence. It is not those events.

I suspect if we can find a reasonable answer to that question about what the spirit of religion is then we might be able to begin to define what it means to be a spiritual person. The spirit of religion is contained less in what we say or what we do and more in understanding the reason behind the reason we do or say. The spirit of religion is located in our motivation. What motivates us to come to church? To pray? To read Scripture?

Some of you are probably wondering why I think motivation is important and even to whom is it important, God or us? I am not at all sure if our motivation matters to God but I think that it can make quite a bit of difference to us because it is through exploration of our motivation that we can begin to discover our level of spirituality.

I don't want to suggest that there is a right or a wrong motivation because frankly anything that gets us into the church, making it possible for us to grow into a relationship with God, is a positive thing. But if we determine that we want our relationship with God to deepen

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and to get richer over time than motivation for why we engage in the behaviors that we do during worship takes on added significance. And this is so not because we need to hold ourselves up to some outside standard but so that we can take stock of what we believe and why.

What in our worship seems to have particular meaning for us? What challenges us the most? What takes the most energy and effort? What aspect of worship do we give the least attention to?

Spiritual growth happens when we open ourselves up to the possibility for it to happen. And we open ourselves in two ways. One way is in actively exploring whom we are and what gives meaning to our lives and the second is in when we make ourselves available to God as completely as possible.

We saw how Nicodemus did it. Under cover of darkness with the threat of being ostracized by the other Jews and losing his position of power and influence he appeared in Jesus' room. First he affirmed what he already knew to be true, that Jesus was sent by God. God at that moment he made himself available and the conversation, the teaching and the way in which his cup was filled, took on a life of its own. Nicodemus opened himself up to the possibility and he became one of Jesus' disciples. We know that he became a disciples because later in the gospel of John, Nicodemus stands up for Jesus in the Sanhedrin and still later in the gospel, after the crucifixion when all the disciples had scattered, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body from the cross, perfumed and oiled it, wrapped it in linen and placed it in a tomb. All this from a religious man who recognized that he needed something more than his religious

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life. What he received was a filling of his cup from the well of living water. That Nicodemus was a disciple of Jesus is also recorded in the Talmud.

These are the words of the hymn prayed at the beginning of this sermon:

Fill my Cup Lord, I lift it up Lord. Come and quench this thirsting in my soul. Bread from heaven feed me till I want no more. Fill my cup, fill it up, and make me whole.

This seems to have been Nicodemus' prayed that evening when he went to see Jesus. He recognized that he needed more than religion in his life. He needed a spiritual connection. He needed a relationship that went beyond saying the right words, or doing the right thing. He needed an engagement with the Lord that would be powerful enough to have him reorient his life; he needed something to motivate him differently, to motivate him towards a different end. His encounter with Jesus that evening revealed to him that living in the flesh and living in the spirit were two different things and as far as faith was concerned, it was better to live in the spirit.

Nicodemus took a courageous step that evening. Opening up oneself to be lead by the spirit can be uncomfortable and scary. Placing our cup before the Lord and asking for it to be filled means that we won't have any control over what goes inside of it. But it also means that we have placed ourselves in a position to be blessed in a way we have yet to experience. With the risk comes a promise. We risk when we make ourselves available to be lead by the spirit but the promise we have is that the cup will be filled to overflowing and we will be made whole.

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What is spirituality? It is walking and living in the spirit of God. It is being lead by the spirit to be in relationship with God and with each other in authentic ways. Being a spiritual person has to be something that we do intentionally. It has to be something we desire, something we seek and something we work at constantly. It's not automatic and doesn't just happen to us. It is both a gift and a reward. A treasure to be prized and earned. Questioning our motivations is one way to begin to discover our level of spirituality.

The other way to discover this about ourselves is by having the question of our spirituality become a part of our prayer life. We can ask God to help us be open and receptive to the spirit in and around us. We can ask God to fill our cup.

Let us pray:

Fill my Cup Lord, I lift it up Lord. Come and quench this thirsting in my soul. Bread from heaven feed me till I want no more. Fill my cup, fill it up, and make me whole.