

THE CHARITY OF NIGHT

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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.' ³Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' ⁴Nicodemus 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?' ⁵Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." ⁸The 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.'

(John 3:1-8, NRSV)

Can people change? The cynics of the world say no. People never really change, at least not most people. Yes there are remarkable stories of some individuals. Yes if you visit an open meeting of AA or another 12-step group you will hear some stories of change, but all in all the cynics would have us throw up our hands and lower our expectations regarding positive change.

What about society as a whole and the world in general? Don't even get the cynics started on the negative road of comparing today with the good old days. They will depress us to no end about how much worse the world is now than it used to be and how we better watch out because tomorrow will be worse still. They tell us that society never really changes, except for the worse.

What did people think 2,000 years ago? For the peasant population living in Israel things looked bleak. Life was hard living under brutal Roman occupation and oppression. Even if they had been a free people life would have been no piece of cake. In this pre-scientific age life expectancy was short; high hopes and aspirations for the future were few and far between. Even many of the religious leaders from whom should have come at least a little hope were either corrupt or so engrossed in petty arguments and power plays that the average person felt left out and left behind.

Until one day an unknown teacher from a second-rate town appeared on the scene with radical ideas like loving one's enemies, accepting all people including the outcasts, feeding the hungry, forgiving those who do us wrong, and praying directly to God with the tender closeness a parent shares with a child.

Jesus made such a splash that even though many of the religious leaders wanted to do him in, others felt compelled to seek his wisdom, even if in secret. Such is the case in today's scripture lesson from John 3 when Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader and

Pharisee, sought out Jesus one night. Why did he come at night? Probably because at that point in his life and career, Nicodemus would have avoided having a serious theological discussion with Jesus for fear of being considered soft on rebel rousing radicals.

Nicodemus knew how to make friends and influence people because he started the conversation by piling on the compliments, one on top of another. He called Jesus rabbi or teacher and said, “We know 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 may have thought: Wait a second...who is this “we,” Nicodemus came alone. And how do you claim to know that I’ve come from God while most of your fellow Pharisees think I’m a trouble-making rabbi from the sticks? Nicodemus went on to refer to the signs or miracles of Jesus. None of this phased Jesus who cut to the chase and answered Nicodemus not on the basis of his compliments, but on the basis of the real question burning in Nicodemus’ heart. Niceties aside, Jesus knew that down deep Nicodemus longed to see and participate in the Kingdom of God. Jesus replied, “No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above [or born again].”

When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God he wasn’t merely referring to Heaven. He was also referring to the Rule or Reign of God in the here and now. Entering God’s Reign means living our lives following God’s way and letting Christ’s way of life be our way of life. An important aspect of being a follower of God is working to help transform the world into a more loving, just, and peaceful place.

In order to get going in this process, Jesus told Nicodemus he needed to be “born again” or “born from above.” In other words, Nicodemus, like us, needed to begin again, to start over, to change his direction. Jesus didn’t say, “Nicodemus you are a bad, awful person and God is really ticked.” Instead he simply said, “If you want to follow God’s way you’re going to have to make a few changes, with God’s help of course.”

I recently thought about Nicodemus and his conversation with Jesus under the cover of darkness. Of course I wasn’t the only person thinking about darkness, there were some 50 million of us in 8 states and 2 Canadian provinces in the dark the night of August 14, 2003 (*Time*, August 25, 2003, p. 35). As I sat there staring at a solitary oil lamp burning in our den, I wondered what was going on in the city. I was only a teenager during the blackout of 1977, but I remember the headline news it made even in Memphis. I don’t know which was the bigger story, that millions could lose electricity or that thousands of people did over a billion dollars worth of damage as they looted stores from Brooklyn to the Brooks Brothers on Madison Avenue (“The Blackouts of ’65 and ’77 Became Defining Moments in the City’s History,” Martin Gottlieb and James Glanz, *The New York Times*, August 15, 2003).

One *New York Times* columnist remembered it this way, “Twenty-six years ago...Brooklyn streets were engulfed by chaos. Looters tore through padlocks with hacksaws. They took crowbars to steel shutters, prying them open like sardine-can lids, or simply jimmed them up with hydraulic jacks and then wedged garbage cans underneath

to keep them open. They pulled up onto sidewalks in tow trucks, slipping the big iron hooks under storefront gates and ripping them clean off. They punched through plate-glass windows...and grabbed clothing off mannequins. Four men wrenched a parking meter out of the ground and used it to batter open the door of a jewelry store. ("The New York That's Visible in the Dark," by Jonathan Mahler, August 17, 2003). The statistics are staggering from that long night back in 1977. "In all, 31 neighborhoods suffered significant damage. There were more than 1,000 fires, 1,600 wrecked or looted stores and 3,700 arrests...To this day, the blackout looting of 1977 remains the only civil disturbance to have hit all five boroughs at the same time" (Ibid.).

I thought about these things as I tried to get Matthew to sleep last week, surrounded by his flashlight collection. I wondered how many of you were stranded in Manhattan and how long it had been since you had had a bite to eat. I wondered if any of you would get mugged or spend the night in fear of bodily harm. And I wondered how many storeowners would get looted this time around.

The next morning I felt a mixture of relief and surprise to learn that I had been asking all the wrong questions. I should have asked myself how many people would help direct traffic? How many people would share their bottled water with a total stranger? How many truck drivers would load dozens of people on their rigs for a free ride? How many deli owners would hand out free cups of coffee? The blackout of 1977 and the blackout of 2003 couldn't have been more different. In 1977 people stared at the shattered city in amazement and hid in fear. In 2003 people stared at the rare sight of stars over Manhattan and shared a bottle of wine.

What a difference. And what a blessing. I've been asking myself the obvious question, how to account for the different response between 1977 and 2003. I certainly believe what Jesus told Nicodemus about the need to experience a spiritual birth. And so I wonder, if individuals can change with God's help, can a city? A lot has changed in the city since 1977. *Newsday* columnist, Sheryl McCarthy, observed, "...the arrival of so many new immigrants has tempered the incendiary relationship that existed between the city's three main ethnic groups. In 1977, the businesses on Third Avenue were virtually all owned by whites. City politics was dominated by whites, and East Harlem and Bushwick's African-American and Puerto Rican residents chafed with resentment over being excluded. Now most of the stores on Third Avenue are owned by Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Asians and a host of new immigrant groups, while...[the current city administration]...includes every major ethnic group in the city and is responsive to the smaller ones...In 1977...in minority neighborhoods incomes were lower, unemployment was higher, and crime and drugs ravaged everyday life. Crime is now at its lowest point in decades...and despite recent setbacks in the economy, people are generally better off than they were then" (*Newsday*, "A Lot's Changed in the City Since '77 Blackout," August 18, 2003).

These encouraging factors say to me that since 1977 New York City has experienced a re-birth, a renaissance. That over the past 26 years progress has been made. And while things are far from perfect, when we see increased minority ownership

of businesses and a diverse power structure that more closely resembles the city itself, we have come a long way. And while we never hope to finish building the Kingdom of God on earth, I believe that when people come closer to living out the teachings of Jesus to love and to heal, to make peace and to make progress in breaking down barriers, it is a blessing and God smiles.

Of course there's another difference between 1977 and 2003. It occurred in 2001. What was your first thought when the northeastern United States lost power? Did you fear it might be terrorism? I did, and was greatly relieved when the voice on the car radio assured me that it wasn't. Because of that day, we are a changed people and a changed city. Sheryl McCarthy put it this way, "A power outage is nothing once you've seen real evil. Since New Yorkers now know that their neighbors aren't the real enemy, when a crisis occurs, their response is to cooperate, not to tear the city down" (Ibid.).

The shared suffering of September 11 surely caused a major difference between 1977 and today. We now know what a real crisis is, versus a mere inconvenience. *Newsday* columnist, Joseph Dolman wrote, "On a normal day, of course, a palpable hostility is thick in the air. As the evening rush begins, motorists honk and bully...But yesterday New Yorkers went into survival mode. And they were generally sophisticated enough to understand that your well-being and my well-being are pretty much one and the same" ("New Yorkers Again Rise to Occasion," August 15, 2003). These thoughts echo the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3 where he wrote the revolutionary words, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are equal in Christ Jesus" (3:28, paraphrased). As New Yorkers and as world citizens our well-being is interconnected for we are one human family in the eyes of God.

Naturally the changes in New Yorkers since September 11 aren't evident every day, but when a crisis hits, we realize that we are all in it together. The behaviors recently shown in the blackout are ways of life that Jesus encouraged not just when we are in crisis mode, but every day of our lives. Stopping to help the stranger, sharing a drink with the thirsty, comforting a crying child, recognizing our interdependence. New York City has changed since September 11. We have been reborn as a more caring and concerned people, at least for our fellow New Yorkers in the midst of a crisis. Imagine how much better we could make our world, how much closer to the dreams of Jesus if we lived this way every day and if we applied it, not just to our fellow New Yorkers, but to our fellow humans, our sisters and brothers all around this world.

The violence and looting of 1977's blackout is behind us, though scars remain for some people. The violence and the deaths of September 11, 2001, still remain heavy on our hearts. Whether in the midst of crisis or on the most perfect summer day we can imagine, God calls us to be born from above, to be filled with the Spirit's love, joy, and peace. We need not listen to the cynics. People can change; cities can change. Our lives and our world can be reborn. We are not enslaved to our past. With God's help, we can create peace in our lives and in our world. And sometimes we find ourselves on the receiving end.

I love the lyrics of Canadian singer/songwriter Bruce Cockburn who sings about what he calls the charity of night:

Wave on wave of life

Like the great wide oceans roll

Haunting hands of memory

Pluck silver strands of soul

The damage and the dying done, the clarity of light

gentle bows and glasses raised to the charity of night

("The Charity of Night," on a CD entitled *The Charity of Night*, 1997).

The charity of night—what a beautiful phrase. After great pain and suffering, when the dust starts to settle and we find a moment to catch our breath some night before going to sleep, we may find a moment of clarity and insight. Such moments are gifts. May the charity we experienced on the night of August 14, continue to grace our lives today and in the days *and* nights to come. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Merciful God, forgive us when we have accepted barriers between people that could be overcome, when we have come up against walls in our lives and let our anger fester, when we have stunted the growth of true community, and when we have regarded ourselves as less than you regard us. Show us your dreams for the building of a better world. We thank you for the progress that has been made. Use us to help take down hostilities that have become dividing walls, and in their place let unity of purpose undergird our life together. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. AMEN.

Portions of this prayer were adapted from *Seasons of the Spirit: Congregational Life*, July 20, 2003, pp. 57-58.