

Born Anew (or rather: How Not to Flunk Life)
A Sermon Based on John 3:1-17
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Eleven years ago this week, I walked through the circle drive door of Plymouth church—the entrance off of 42nd Street—for my first day on the job. I was wide-eyed, full of ideas and enthusiasm for the opportunities that lie ahead. I was so ready to change the world with all of you—and I knew exactly what we needed to do, too. I was so sure. Certain, even. Looking back now, all I can say is: Wow. I had no idea. No clue. And what's even more impressive: I really still don't. There is so much I don't know about this job and this life and what it means to be a child of God. Sure, sometimes I think I've got my arms around it, but every time I think I've got it down, something pokes me or shakes me or knocks me off balance as a reminder that I've still got a ways to go.

What's that old saying: "If you want to make God laugh, just tell God your plans?" Yeah. God and I laugh a lot. A LOT. I'd like to believe that God is laughing with me and not at me...but who knows? In any case, I have found that the best response to God's laughing fits is to turn to people I admire, respect and trust for a reality check, a little advice and a reminder that I'm not alone. It really does help to know you're not alone.

In my early years here, one of my favorite "I want to be like him when I grow up" gurus was a guy named Mike Yaconelli. He had made a name for himself in the youth ministry world yet was still about as down to earth and humble as anyone I had ever met. So one night in April of 2002 after a particularly difficult and trying day, I sat down at the computer and dumped it all out there in a desperate attempt to gain some much needed clarity and insight. "Dear Mike... You don't know me, but I have been a fan of yours for a long time..." is how my e-mail began. From there I went into a long ramble about my call to ministry and my job here at Plymouth and some of the challenges that I was facing and how badly I wanted to be successful here. You see, I really, really, really wanted to

be the best darn Minister to Young Adults and Youth that Plymouth had ever seen (which wouldn't be hard because I was then and still am the only Minister to Young Adults and Youth that Plymouth has ever seen...but still...). What I really wanted to know from Mike Yaconelli was: would he be willing to help me become that successful superstar kind of minister?

Much to my surprise, I received a reply from Mike just a few days later. Here's what he had to say: "Angie: I'm on vacation and little did I know what kind of letter awaited me this morning. I was in tears by the end of your letter...I have this gift/curse of being able to read between the lines and believe me when I read your letter I was deeply moved by your passion for ministry. Obviously Jesus has refused to let you go, he will not let you go and he will not let you off the hook. Your letter is a keeper and I shall refer to it often when I'm not doing so well. I would love to hear how you're doing from time to time. Please keep in touch. Mike."

Wow. He wrote back. From vacation, even. I was impressed. But...what was up with the Jesus talk? I didn't care about Jesus. What I cared about was being good—or rather, great—at my job. I needed practical advise on how to be successful, not a bunch of blah, blah talk about Jesus not letting me off the hook. I was really disappointed.

I may not have recognized it at that moment but I did come to realize in time that Mike was onto something: he knew that I didn't need to buy the latest curriculum, books or videos to do this thing "right" (which is funny, because at that time, Mike Yaconelli was CEO of one of the largest youth ministry curriculum companies in the United States). He simply saw what I couldn't (or wouldn't) see: that I needed to change my thinking and my expectations. Actually, that's not quite true—what I needed was a whole different way of being. I needed to let go of my agenda and patterns of behavior and open up to let God do God's thing a little (or a lot) more.

In other words, I was going to have to be born again. Anew. From above.

Oddly enough, today's scripture is where all of this whole "church as competition" idea started with me. I was about 6 or 7 years old in Sunday School. My teacher thought that it was important that we memorize scripture. Now mind you, I'm not against memorizing scripture. I think it's a good idea. The thing was, though, that my classmates and I weren't memorizing scripture in order to better understand who we were or who God was or what life was all about. Nope. We were memorizing scripture in order to get a gold star next to our name on a chart hanging on the wall. And the first scripture we were to memorize in order to earn that coveted star? John 3:16: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.*" The King James Version, no less. And just so you know: I was the first one to get a gold star on that chart. I won. I was well on my way to becoming a rockstar in our faith community. I was hooked. Next up? Psalm 23: "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...he maketh me to lie down in green pastures...he leadeth me beside the still waters...*" Yes. Another star. Psalm 23 was followed by the Lord's Prayer: "*Our Father, who art in heaven...*" which was followed by the Apostle's Creed: "*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth...*" Oh, yeah. By the end of the year, my chart was full of stars. Covered. Solid. Of course, I didn't know what any of these words had to do with me...and honestly, I didn't really care. I only knew that I was good. I was a winner. And God does love a winner—or so I was led to believe.

I hate to admit it, so please don't tell anyone, but as much as I'd like to think that I've changed over the years, that competitive streak is still alive and well in me. It's thriving, actually. I still want to do this right. I still want to earn the gold star. Be the best.

Nicodemus and I share something in common here: we both want to impress Jesus.

Nicodemus kicks off today's story by telling Jesus: "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God—nobody could do the things you do apart from God." Yup—the old "you don't know me, but I've admired your work for years..." line. Works every time. Except when it doesn't. And it doesn't work here. Jesus isn't impressed with Nicodemus' attempt at flattery. So, in his response to Nicodemus, Jesus does away with the niceties and the small talk and cuts right to the chase: "Let me tell you something: you're not

going to get into the kingdom of God by doing what you're already doing more perfectly. You need a whole new way of looking at and doing life. You have got to be born again. “

Nicodemus doesn't get it. So he defaults to what he believes has worked for him many times before: sarcasm. OK, I admit I might be reading into the text here. After all, it's hard to tell someone's tone of voice just from seeing words on a page, but in my opinion Nicodemus seems to have an attitude when he says, “Born again? How do you suggest I do that, exactly—crawl back into the womb? Ick...”

Nicodemus and Jesus are talking past each other here. Jesus is saying one thing—a metaphorical thing—and Nicodemus is hearing another—a literal thing. With that in mind, I'm thinking that it would be intellectually stimulating and thought provoking and maybe even somewhat enlightening to stand up here for the rest of our time together this morning and ponder some of the images of this story and how those images could be interpreted in multiple ways. In other words, what was John's intended message and what did his listeners actually hear? Were they talking past each other, too? For example, when John says that Nicodemus came to Jesus “by night” does he mean that Nicodemus was evil or dark as some scholars would suggest? Or was he implying that Nicodemus was merely clueless—in the dark? Or does “he came to Jesus by night” simply mean that he came to Jesus at night? And after we wrestled with that for awhile, it might be kind of fun to go a little further into the story and discuss the symbolism of the water and the Spirit and how this aspect of the story might or might not tie in with Jesus' baptism story—the water and Spirit and new life and call. That would be an interesting conversation. And from there we could compare and contrast the different baptism accounts in the various gospels and possibly—if we had enough time—make a connection to how in the Pentecost story the Spirit used fire instead of water to baptize people with new life and wonder aloud what is the likelihood that story actually, factually happened. As long as we're on that topic, we could expand it on out: what is the likelihood that any of these stories actually, factually happened?

Yup. That would be a good conversation. I would enjoy that. A lot. I do love talking about what words mean and how stories connect...as long as it leads to transformation. As Jesus implied to Nicodemus, all of the debates and discussions and desires to do this thing right—those things in and of themselves won't give you life. Only being born again...and again...and again...and again...can do that.

And the point of all of this—the reason we do all this stuff around here (worship, classes, programs, etc.)—is transformation. New life. Full life. Whole and holy life with and through God. So let's don't go down that road full of facts and figures and “how can this be” questions today. Not today, anyway. We'll do that another time. Instead let's spend the next few moments sitting with this crazy, somewhat incomprehensible invitation to new life:

Even though he died in a car accident not long after we started exchanging e-mails, Mike Yaconelli has remained a mentor of mine over the years. There's a story of his that I read during Lent every year—a snippet of this story is inside the front cover of the Lenten journal. I'll close with it here (from “Dangerous Wonder”):

When I was six years old, my favorite comic book character was Superman. I admired his strength, his x-ray vision, his colorful uniform, and bright red cape. What captured my imagination most was Superman's ability to fly. Many of my childhood fantasies were about flying. I wanted to fly! I honestly believed flying was still a possibility...

Sneaking into my parents' bathroom, I would find the stash of forbidden towels (the thick, new ones reserved only for guests). Once outside, with the towel tied around my neck and dragging on the dirt behind me, I would run as fast as I could and jump off the highest survivable launching pad I could find. With arms outstretched, cape billowing behind me, wind rushing past my ears, I believed I was flying.

Then came a day when, without warning, without provocation, I woke up, never to wear a “cape” again. Wherever the knowledge came from, it came nonetheless, and from that

moment on I knew flying was nothing more than a childhood fantasy. I would never fly...and there was no Superman.

In retrospect, my day of “enlightenment” was a very sad day. I know now that something inside of me died that day. Whatever the “something” was, it was the stuff of dreams and imagination—the place where dancing, singing, laughter, and playing lived. Even at six, I understood that the possibility of flying wasn’t the point: it was the aliveness I felt when I thought I could fly; it was the voice I heard deep inside—a warm and loving voice, a living, believing voice, a wild and dangerous voice. Every time I heard that voice, I recognized who it was: God. But that day, when I was just six years young, my God-hearing went bad.

That voice is deep within all of us. It speaks to us continuously, knocking on the door of our consciousness. When we are children, the voice is very loud (as it was with me) shattering our awareness with overwhelming clarity...(but) one sad day we are aware of an absence. We can no longer hear the God-voice. And we are left with only silence. We did not want to stop hearing God’s voice. Indeed, God kept on speaking. But our lives became louder. The increasing crescendo of our possessions, the ear-piercing noise of our busy-ness, and the soul-smothering volume of our endless activity drowned out the still, small voice of God.

Walker Percy once said, “He got all A’s and flunked life.” Jesus reminded Nicodemus that this isn’t about impressing God or earning your way into God’s favor. And Mike Yaconelli reminded me (and still reminds me) that this isn’t about gold stars or success or doing things right. This is about being alive.

Like I said, sometimes I think I have my arms around this stuff...and then something comes along and pokes me or shakes me or knocks me off balance as a reminder that I’ve still got a ways to go. Today’s story is one of those “somethings.” I’m reminded here that God really did love the world so much...and does love the world so much. I am reminded that God’s still speaking voice is here, right now, trying to get my attention through the

these stories about Jesus—the one who will not let me go and will not let me off the hook. And God is trying to get my attention through people like Mike Yaconelli (and many, many others) who are willing to call it like they see it and tell me what I need to hear, whether I want to hear it or not. And God is trying to get my attention in the most simple, ordinary, every day things—if I'd just slow down and stop and listen long enough to pay attention.

It's been eleven amazing, life-changing, surprising, wonderful years, huh? Here's to whatever lies ahead: may there be more awareness, more "a-ha's", more "you've got to be kidding me" moments and more insight into who I am and who you are and to who we are as a community and to what God is calling us to do and be in the years to come. And here's to not doing any of those things "right"—but here's to doing them faithfully. Here's to hearing God again. Here's to new ways of being and here's to being alive—may we all be born anew today and every day.

Amen.