

Seven Stops on the Road To Resurrection (Week Two): Reformation

John 3:1-17; and excerpt from Stephen J. Nichols

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Introduction

At Southminster, we are much more comfortable with the pre-Easter Jesus, that dusty, itinerant peasant preacher who proclaimed that what he called the Kingdom of God was not something that will come, but was already here in fact, it is within each of us. That pre-Easter Jesus who challenged the systemic injustices and turned the world upside down with his message of inclusivity for all. The pre-Easter Jesus, who overturns the tables of the money changers in the temple with his focus on the poor and his challenge of authority – *that* pre-Easter Jesus rings true for us. That pre-Easter Jesus, the man called Jesus bar Joseph from Nazareth – was in fact – branded a heretic. At Southminster, we like that guy. We resonate with that Jesus.

So our next stop on our lenten journey -- on the road to resurrection -- is reformation. Jesus was a reformer, he challenged the status quo, was willing to fight for what was right, even confront the so-called wisdom of the day and press on towards a world of inclusion and equity for all.

Jesus, Nicodemus and the Ferocious Tiger

Likely an older man, Nicodemus in our Lenten text for today had a wise and curious mind. He was not satisfied with the legalism of the Pharisees. His deep hunger for truth coupled with his courage to seek the truth from its source was his superpower. Essentially, he was a religious hotshot who snuck out of his house when the neighbors weren't watching – just for a nocturnal interview with Jesus – only to be told he had to be born again. His story can be found only here in John Chapter three and later in John's gospel when Jesus was crucified. He was one of the two men who had lowered the corpse from the cross, wrapped it up and buried it. The text says "he cried" when he did this. So you might imagine when the news hit Nicodemus of the resurrection – he must have laughed hysterically. // You can hear him saying: "Jesus told me that you must be born again."

There is a story from the Zen Buddhist tradition, from Japan: "A man was being chased by a ferocious tiger across a field. At the edge of the field was a cliff. In order to escape the jaws of the tiger, the man caught a hold of a vine and swung himself over the edge of the cliff. Dangling down, he saw, to his dismay, there were more tigers on the ground below him, waiting for his arrival and roaring at him. He was caught between the two. And to make his situation even worse, two small mice were gnawing on the vine to which he clung. He knew that at any moment he would fall to certain death.

That is when he noticed a wild strawberry growing on the cliff wall. Clutching the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other and put it in his mouth. “Ahhhhh,” the joy of living in the present, the story counsels. Find beauty, energy – sweetness – even in the moment of extreme.

Shaped by our “Tiger” Past

So what do these stories of the ferocious tiger and Nicodemus mean for us in this season of Lent? I have discovered many commentaries offered on this Buddhist story – some more far fetching than others. Perhaps, we can only be empowered when we know the tigers of our lives – how our past has shaped us to who we are, how our future often limits and prevents us from doing what we are capable of and where our source of strength and purpose lie.

The tiger on top of the cliff can be seen as the past – to which we cannot return. The past reminds us where we came from and who we are. We are shaped by each of the experiences and when we take time to reflect and learn – our faith deepens because of them.

Why did Nicodemus cry at the foot of the cross? It is because he remembered what Jesus said to him. The 18th century poet Thomas Gray is responsible for the often-quoted phrase: “Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise”. Gray’s poem *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* is a romantic poem about returning to a place after years have passed. The poem is divided into two parts: the first half is a cheerful reflection on childhood, and the second half is a dark commentary on adulthood.

Nicodemus was reminded of not only what Jesus said to him, but how his words cut sharply into his past. At Clark, I teach us a class entitled Family in Cross-Cultural Perspective. One of the assignments that I have created is called the “Who Am I Project”. Students spend the whole term developing the story of their lives as it connects to self, family and the wider culture around them. Students tell me that this assignment has been the most meaningful assignment that they have ever had in any class they have ever taken. It can be very empowering to develop and reflect on our stories.

When I think of Nicodemus, and when I think of most of us at Southminster who are older, we don’t need an assignment to reflect on our life stories, it just happens. I find myself now more than ever, reflecting on the tigers and events of my life. What would my life be like if I hadn’t moved nineteen times before I graduated high school, if I hadn’t been cut from the basketball team as a Senior in high school, if I hadn’t met Kathy in the most unlikely of circumstances, or if I hadn’t come to Southminster 18 years ago? I also remember every stupid or crazy thing I have done. Who was that guy, I ask myself? But instead of being ashamed or filled with regret, Lent and the road to resurrection involve returning to places after years have passed and recognizing the many ways that we have been shaped by them. This week, take time to reflect: what are

three events – three turning points of your life and how have they shaped you into who you are today?

Shaped by our “Tiger” Future

The tigers below, represent the future with all of its dangers. Aren't we all afraid of the future to some extent – the threats and dangers that we may or may not face only promote fear and uncertainty. When I graduated from high school it was a time of change and fear – Back then, we had to read George Orwell's book “1984” which heightened everyone's fear of Big Brother and a dystopian future – it was a time of uncertainty, it was a time of passionate political debates. Like it is now, for different reasons, Russia was denigrated as the evil empire. Change did not seem possible. Like it is now, good news didn't get the same coverage as bad news – every day you received a steady stream of sensationalism and scandal – stories with a message that suggest change isn't possible – you can't make a difference. Some things never change I guess. Today, it seems impossible to close that gap between life as it is and life as we want it to be. We long for a time when the news media reports on more than one noun and one verb: Trump and Trumping.

Lent calls us to respond to the tigers below us – the tigers of our future – to remain steadfast as reformers – even when change seems impossible. Sure, we can avoid the tigers and stay where it is safe or we can live with confidence that the power within us is greater than the ferocious tigers around us. Jesus was the ultimate reformer. When he overturned the tables of those who had made a mockery of the temple, Jesus' confidence empowered him to take a stand and challenge the unjust systems that prevent the kin-dom of God happening here on earth. When he met with Nicodemus in the silence of that dark night, he knew that Nicodemus was searching for meaning and purpose and that his words would be startling and even shocking to a wise man. He said them anyway. Jesus spoke truth to power. He knew that Nicodemus needed to take a stand and use his power and privilege for good – to become a reformer. // What are you doing to reform the world around you? How are you using your power and privilege for good?

Shaped by the passage of time

Moving on in the story: the mice can be seen as time and the passage of time. One piece of anonymous wisdom recommends: “Enjoy life. This is not a dress rehearsal”. There will never be enough time to do all that you want or have to do in life. Everyone wishes they had more time – so many pesky mice that compete for our attention. Lent invites us to slow down – to maintain our sanity amidst the demands and obligations and obstacles all around.

I teach my students at Clark that there is no one on earth that can manage time. Time will go on whether we want it to or not. How we respond to the challenges of those pesky mice will determine our future. And creating margins – space for reflection – time to discover wholeness and balance – is necessary if we ever want to restore our humanity.

Octavia Raheem is a black Author that I find myself once again reading during this African American History month. She has written a book entitled: *Pause, Rest, Be: Sillness Practice for Courage in Times of Change*. She writes, “rest is the most underrated superpower”. I want to read a couple of her profound insights about slowing down and learning to “Be”. Take a moment after each statement to Pause, Rest, Be:

- “Rest is the bridge between where you are and where you want to be.”
- “Rest and you will remember you are already who you are trying so hard to become.”

What is your strawberry?

Finally, a question that you have all been waiting for – in the story of the ferocious tiger, what in the world does the strawberry represent? Unfortunately, I cannot answer that for you. The only person that can answer that is you. What keeps you centered? What gives you joy? What gives you purpose? That is your strawberry! Jesus reminds Nicodemus, even in his golden years, that “For God so loved the world” and his purpose was none other than to be reformed and always reforming to the purposes of that love.

A not so well-known saying, from the Upanishads, one of the earliest layers of wisdom in the Hindu Tradition: “That which is whole is joy. There is no joy in fractioned existence. Only the whole is joy. And one must desire to understand the whole in order to find joy.”

As we travel this season of Lent together – the road to resurrection – may we come to know the whole of our existence and all that is in the world – even though the whole is not all goodness and light. May we come to know the whole of our lives including the tigers that can seem to dominate – may they not overwhelm us but strengthen our resolve.

My friends, it is the whole that is deeply spiritual – there we can live as if God’s love truly has no boundaries – there we can truly be reformed.

A-men.