

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

John 3: 1-17

1) Fear... How much of our lives and how much of life in the world is governed by fear? Think about what the pandemic has done here and around the world and the great insecurity and uncertainty it has unleashed... Fear. Think about the economy, job security, unemployment, pensions, healthcare costs, housing.... Fear. The doctor calls us. She wants to see us in order to discuss the results of some tests we've undergone. Our mind immediately races to the worst possible outcome... Fear. Will our children and grandchildren succeed in life? We invest in every possible educational advantage. We provide them with every possible opportunity in life. But still, we have no guarantees. They are unique human beings each one - emotionally, mentally, spiritually. What will become of them and for many of us who depend on them in so many ways for our own fullness in life? Fear....

As a society, we accept the fact that there are vast dangers beyond our control. There are extreme weather patterns tied to climate change. There is the danger of another global pandemic to come at some point that is inevitable. There is the danger of racist or sexist or terrorist violence or mass murder. What restrictions or changes to our lifestyles or changes because of our personal health, or adjustments in terms of our expectations or dreams for our lives must we make because of fear of what may or may not be?

And fear also functions in our beliefs and our spiritual commitments too. Why do people believe in God? Why do people give money to religious institutions? Why do people search for deeper spiritual meaning? Well, on the most basic level there is a fear of the unknown, of life beyond. What will happen to me after I die? Is there a heaven? Is there a hell? Is there anything? Am I safe and secure eternally speaking? We know that historically, Christianity, as well as other religions, have capitalized on peoples' fears the way many other institutions and people in power capitalize on peoples' fears. Fear is a big motivator. What we worry about, what we are concerned about, how we use our money, what we think about, how we live - it is all shaped by our fears as much as anything else.

2) But sometimes our fears are not up front and on the surface. Sometimes our fears are hidden behind our concern for better security and protection in our

lives. A key thinker of the early modern world, John Locke, described us human beings in our essence as driven by fear of death and a desire for self-preservation. Because of this we are motivated to work together to maximize our security and protection. We wouldn't be so motivated in planning, organizing and investing in our security if we weren't afraid of not having it, would we? And security comes in many forms – material, social and spiritual. We need enough money in the bank, we need safety in our homes and communities, we need to know that we will not die alone and that we are safe after we die.

3) But there is also an even more subtle level where fear operates. Some of us in our prosperous society may not be terribly afraid of too many things. We are sufficiently healthy, sufficiently secure in our lifestyle choices, sufficiently comfortable, maybe too much so. But some of us still feel we are missing something.

The quest for the spiritual is a major undertaking in North America, and many people are undertaking this search outside traditional communities of faith. Many people don't want to join faith communities. They believe such communities require too much investment, that they have old ideas, that they are more concerned with moral dos and don'ts, and they want to tell you what you have to believe. Instead, many spiritual seekers today are more interested in finding their own individual path, new ways to experience the spiritual in their own way, not by being told what to believe and what to do.

But what is it that motivates spiritual seekers? It's not fear, necessarily, at least not a fear that's obvious. It's not more security they want because they seem to have more than enough. Rather, it's a feeling of emptiness. Money can only go so far to fulfill you. Your work or profession can only go so far. Getting involved in social activities, causes or even physical activity... it can all be exhilarating and fulfilling, but can such pursuits provide you with ultimate purpose? Getting involved with children, family and friends is also very fulfilling, but can this provide you with all the meaning you need? It's definitely part of your identity, to be a parent or grandparent, to be a child, to be a friend, to have a purpose and a goal through our primary relationships and our jobs. But, what about a personal connection with the Sacred, the Transcendent, God?

If it's not fear that drives us, or the search for greater security, it is a feeling of emptiness, a sense that something more is needed to ground and fulfill our lives.

Well, if you are open to it, the gospel offers that something more. Fear may be a great motivator for most people, as is the need for more security and protection. And many people may feel that life is empty, flat, or missing something they'd like to find. What the gospel offers as something more is a pathway to transformation. And the means to such transformation is called: Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ. The Holy Spirit is an energy that transforms the way we feel, the way we think and the way we choose to live. How do we find the energy called Holy Spirit, and how do we keep finding it when we lose our way, our focus and our meaning and purpose? Let's consider our gospel reading for some guidance.

Our reading begins by addressing the reality of fear. Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the cover of night. He is a man driven by fear. He is part of an elite religious/ political group in Jewish society called the Pharisees. They have strict rules about membership. They have definite views about society. They have clear cut ideas about moral and political do's and don'ts, as well as why the Jewish nation is in trouble. They don't like Jesus. He talks with an authority all his own. He is driven not by fear but by love and he is far too accepting of people with moral flaws, even those who are moral failures. How can you help people if you don't instill a little fear in them? How can you help people change if they can't be scared into finding better security for themselves if they follow moral rules? How can you help people find their fulfillment if they are not motivated by a frantic search to fill the emptiness in their lives?

Jesus talks about the movement of the Holy Spirit. When you catch the Holy Spirit, or better, when you are caught up by the Holy Spirit, fear falls away... Now don't get me wrong. Fear is a part of all of our lives however much we may be filled with the Holy Spirit. Fear is a safety valve within us, making us aware of danger, making us mindful of many things. But for the deepest transformations in our lives, for the richest flowering of love in our lives, for the greatest purposes in our lives, fear is a major obstacle. Fear may have its place, but it should not be our primary motivator. Fear should not be at the center of our deepest drives and motivations.

If not fear, then, what else?... Love. And how can we think about love in a solid way, not just as a mushy, sentimental, soft, fuzzy, shallow kind of way? Let's consider what Jesus says about the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is God's invisible presence. And the greatest sign that the Spirit is working is when love wells up within us. We visit with someone we know well. They're someone with whom we have found it a challenge much of the time. We have problems with their character, their negative attitude, their choices in life. We may feel that even though they have suffered problems in life, they are often the author of their own troubles. And yet, and yet, we have this experience, this experience of something rising within us. We make a connection during our visit. They share with us some intimate details of their lives. Their better selves are drawn forth. In their vulnerability there is a new wisdom. We see courage and strength in them. We feel warm toward them. This is the movement of God's Spirit. In the gospels, Jesus repeatedly asks his disciples, asks us, to pray for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the birther of love.

And think about your life and the changes in it. Any personal transformation in your life that is for the good involves love. Think about it. In key moments of life, our fears fall away. We begin to trust, and love begins to grow, setting even deeper roots within us. We come to new places of acceptance, a more durable peace within despite trouble without. We open to people with whom we could be closed. We are less prone to judge, more prone to see the good in them. We see beauty in the world around us, in spite of all the degradation of our planet, the bad attitudes in society, the cruelties and the tragedies... in spite of all this we see and feel beauty, goodness, gratitude, awe.

You see when Jesus speaks about the new birth to Nicodemus, this is what he has in mind. To believe in Jesus is to receive from Jesus, to receive his Spirit, the Holy Spirit. It's an experience. For some of us it doesn't happen all at once. Usually, dramatic conversions are connected to those who have major crises, those who have major falls and major disasters befall them. For most of us, though, life happens in stages, with some advances and some setbacks. And so, the kind of personal transformation we need is the kind that makes us better able to deal with situations in our lives, relationships in our lives, challenges that stretch our limits and our patience.

The kind of personal transformation we need is the kind that challenges our propensity to be afraid, to worry and to despair. Personal transformation is

about discovering openings in our lives where there weren't any, new ways of feeling toward others where there was hardness before, a new sense of trust and peace in what is or what will be... Even though there will always be new things to fear and to worry about, there is also new love, along with faith and hope to engage our fears creatively and constructively.

The love who is Holy Spirit is the invisible movement and energy of God, living in and through Jesus, breathed into us as we open our hearts and pray for it to enter... "For God so loved the world..." we are told. Jesus came into the world not "to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Love, when it is real, transforms. It overcomes those places of fear, those places of insecurity in our lives, those places and spaces of emptiness, where we feel life is missing something fundamental.

Whoever we are, we will experience fear in our lives. Whoever we are, we will look for some security and protection in our lives. Whoever we are, we will experience times where we feel emptiness. As Christians, though, our primary resource is our reaching out to God in prayer and meditation. We are looking for ever new depths of transformation in our lives, of being born again and again from above. As we face new fears and worries we pray for God's peace. As we recognize new spaces of emptiness and insecurity in us, we pray for love to fill us with purpose and trust, so that we don't have to be afraid of what is and what will be.

May God the Holy Spirit come to you and fill you again and again. May God the Holy Spirit come within you again and again, and pass through you toward others who will find blessing in your warmth and groundedness.

Let us pray: Come Holy Spirit... Fill us with your love... transform us in those places of fear, insecurity and emptiness in us... may we experience your abundance and your peace... Amen.