

My dad is retiring in August. As many of you may know, my dad is a minister. He serves a small town church in rural Indiana. My dad has been in full time ministry since I was born, most of it in farming communities in the Midwest. I did some calculating and realized that's over 40 years of sermons, usually two a week (Sunday morning services and Sunday evening services), which adds up to nearly 4,500 distinct messages that my dad has spoken to audiences of various sizes (which doesn't even count the Sunday school lessons, small groups, seminars, revivals etc. etc.), and this August he's going to step away from those duties. That's pretty hard for me to get my head around.

Maybe that's why I connected so strongly with Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*. It's the story of an older minister named John Ames who is serving as the pastor of a small church in a little town named Gilead in rural Iowa. The book really struck a chord with me because it's written as a memoir from this old pastor to his young son. The wisdom that this seasoned minister has to share with his boy is deep and moving. Ames shares about his own humanity (his limitations; his unmet expectations in life; the obstacles he has overcome; his joys; & his regrets). He shares about God (the aspects of our Creator that He understands & the parts He doesn't; the characteristics that he loves and those he struggles with). Robinson's book is staggering in its serenity and poignancy, which is probably why it won the Pulitzer Prize for literature.

But for me, I relate to the book on another level. My dad is a retiring minister and I'm his son, and when I read the book it feels familiar in a way that's difficult to describe. The story is fictional, of course, but it seems like a well-worn path to me, and I'm touched by it in ways that run down deep into the bone and marrow of my life.

Now I'm guessing that if *you* think about it for a moment, there's probably someone in *your* life, someone who is years ahead of you (maybe a parent, or a teacher, or a mentor), and you have been the beneficiary of the wisdom they have gained. They brought sound advice and wise counsel to your life in moments when you really needed it. Think for just a moment about that person from an older generation who has made a mark on your life because they shared from their experience and knowledge. (*Turn to the person next to you & share with them about that person for just a moment.)

Wisdom is passed down from one generation to the next. That's the way it's supposed to work, right? Wisdom and experience is taught from the old to the young. I've experienced this in my life and you have in yours, but then we come to the life of Jesus and all our assumptions of how things are supposed to work get dismantled and taken apart.

Go to John 3:1. We're going to see Jesus connect with a Godly older man named Nicodemus. *"There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. Rabbi, he said, we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you."* (John 3:1-2)

Stop there for a moment... Nicodemus was a respected and influential civic and religious leader. He was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Hebrew peoples' equivalent of a Supreme Court. He was a Pharisee...a devout, upstanding, pulled-together, moral and religious man! Nicodemus is supposed to be the one explaining things to Jesus, but instead, he comes to Jesus to learn. It's yet another case of God's topsy-turvy, what's up is down and what's down is up Kingdom.

Last week we began the third section of our Garden to City journey. In 2016 we are moving through the Bible from beginning to end. We spent our winter in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Then we spent the spring looking at God's people, Israel, as they go through their ups and downs. Now, at last, we enter into the New Testament, and for the rest of the summer we will be in the Gospels taking a

look at the life of Jesus. The title of our series is Moment of Truth, because each week we're going to see Jesus interact with another person and change their lives forever.

We're familiar with what it means to have a moment of truth, right? It's that moment when something that had been hidden is finally revealed; when something that needed to be said is finally spoken; it's that point in your life when you realized that you needed to move in another direction so you changed course and started down a new path. You've experienced a moment like that, right?

Nicodemus is about to experience that moment in his own life. He comes to Jesus in the dark of night, hoping to have some of his doubts and questions answered, and Jesus doesn't disappoint.

Listen to Jesus' response!

"Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God'. 'What do you mean?' exclaimed Nicodemus. 'How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?' Jesus replied, 'I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don't be surprised when I say, You must be born again.'" [verse 9] "How are these things possible?" Nicodemus asked. (John 3:3-7 & 9)

When Nicodemus approaches Jesus, you would expect Jesus to say, "My man, Nick, you just keep doing what you're doing...you're a model citizen in God's kingdom!" Instead, Jesus says, "You must be born again." Some of us hear those words and immediately think of the person handing out religious tracts at Fenway or shouting on the street-corner, "You must be born again, or else! Turn or Burn!" Those images pollute our ability to understand what Jesus is actually saying in these verses.

Think of it this way:

When children are born, without exception, they have nothing to do with coming into the world! Let's be honest, **I** had very little to do with my own children's births! My wife, Jennifer, did all the work. And not a single one of our kids came into the world, turned around, and said, "Thanks mom! Nice job! You really pushed me out of there!" That never happened. It's a ridiculous notion, right?

I had nothing to do with my own birth and neither did you. We didn't earn the gift of life or contribute in any way to our existence. We were simply born by God's grace and creativity with a little help from our parents!

The same is true of spiritual rebirth! You and I don't play a role in saving ourselves! We don't work to earn God's favor so that He'll say, "Wow, that one over there is really worthy of my love!"

No! God, by His grace, works out His salvation *in* us by bringing us to faith in Him; convicting us of sin; softening our hearts toward repentance; giving us a love for Him, and desire to place our lives in His hands!

From start to finish, our spiritual birth- just like our physical birth- is something that someone else must do for us! And in the same way we must be physically born if we're going to live, we must be spiritually reborn if we're going to experience the life God created us for!

In his book *Encounters With Jesus*, Tim Keller writes...

"This is an astonishing thing to say to a man like Nicodemus. Jesus is saying that the pimps and the prostitutes outside on the street are in the same position, spiritually, as he. There is Nicodemus, flush with his moral and spiritual accomplishments, and there is someone out on the street who is homeless and addicted, and as far as God is concerned they are equally lost. They

both have to start from scratch. They both have to be born again. They both need eternal spiritual life or something will eat them alive. And that life is going to have to be a free gift.”

Jesus looks at Nicodemus- this mature religious leader- and says, “Without the merciful and miraculous intervention of God in your life, you don’t have a prayer.”

Now, most of us look at this story and think, “How is it possible that a religious man with the pedigree and maturity of Nicodemus, can be so confused about what God wants from him.” And if we think that, it’s not too long before we begin to wonder, “If a guy like Nicodemus can get that out of touch with what God wants in his life, what about me?”

Let’s be honest, many people today (probably some of us) have this idea in our heads that if there really are pearly gates in heaven, some people are *worthy* to walk through them and others aren’t! We have these categories in mind for who is in and who is out!

For instance, maybe we would say, “God accepts me because I was born into a religious family,” or “I’ve participated in all the sacraments,” or “I’m a kind and loving person,” or “I go to church as often as I can and give my time and resources away.”

If that’s the way we think, we’re like Nicodemus. We believe that Jesus loves us and welcomes us because we’ve been good, devout, and moral! But, in these verses Jesus explains to Nicodemus that if we think for a moment that our goodness will get us into God’s presence, we’re fools!

At the same time, there are some of us who, believe that God would *never* have us. Maybe we have a soiled past, or a secret sin that is tearing us apart! As a result, we live with an unbearable shame and stigma that we’re convince God will never forgive. He could never look past *that* piece of our lives.

Please hear me. If you believe that God has to accept you because you’re very good...or that God won’t have you because you’re very bad...Jesus words in these verses are meant to correct our mistaken assumptions.

You see, the Good News that Jesus came to bring tells us that we can’t get into God’s presence because of our goodness, and yet we’re not excluded from God’s presence because of our badness!

Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul...

“But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!)...God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.”

(Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9)

God loves us and He has poured out His grace on us even when we were dead in our sins! (Cold, hard, and unresponsive)

Jesus Christ died the death we deserved to give us a chance at new life! And now...by God’s grace, He offers us freedom from sin and forgiveness for our past. He extends to us the opportunity for a new beginning, and by the power of His Spirit He is capable of restoring our lives- we can be the people He created us to be!

God’s work in us is a gift...so, we can’t boast! But we do celebrate Christ and the marvelous gift of mercy and life that is ours in Him!

The reality is that we've all looked to something else besides God for our salvation. Whether we're looking to pleasure, sex, money, and power to make this life worth living; or looking to our own goodness and moral achievement to earn God's approval, we're equally lost in sin! We desperately need for Jesus to give us the life that only He can give!

So...what should we do in light of this? Let me encourage you to consider two things you can do.

First- Respond to the Good News – Maybe today, you've heard about the grace Jesus offers us for the first time in a way that your heart understands! For the first time, you recognize that you are in need of rescue. If the truth that Jesus loves you and gave His life for you is pressing into your heart, respond to Him personally!

Listen to His invitation in John 3:16-18!

16 *"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. 17 God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.*

18 *"There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him.*

If in your heart, you know Jesus' is offering you a life that you don't have (eternal, joy, limitless, rest, peace, forgiveness), believe it! When you choose to place your faith in Jesus, when you say to Him, "Jesus...please accept me on the basis of your goodness, not mine! My life is yours!" That response to Jesus is a belief that saves!

Second: Celebrate the Good News–

Most Monday mornings, we wake up believing that God smiles at us because we've been good and loveable and well-behaved. So if you had a bad weekend, (watched too much Netflix, yelled at your kids, or drank one too many with your friends)- you believe that God no longer likes you! But if you went to church, or volunteered at Harbor, and maybe even brought a friend with you, God smiles!

God's goodness and favor doesn't depend on our goodness, but on Christ's!

Immerse your heart in that Good News. Ask God to help you rest in it! Over and over again...your heart will be released from fear and pride, and you'll grow up into the freedom and fullness of Christ!

Finally: Consider Baptism –

Baptism is a celebration of what Jesus has done for us! That's why we do it publicly. Every person who steps into the water is saying two things:

First, "Jesus, I need you to rescue me. Apart from you, I'm lost, I'm broken, I'm in need! I recognize the mess my sin has made in my life, the divide it has created between you and me, and Jesus I long to be reunited with you to be brought back into the arms of my Heavenly Father! I need you!"

And secondly baptism says, "Jesus, I want you to be the leader of my life from this day forward! If you loved me so much that you would lay down your life for me...you're worthy of everything, so I choose to follow you- my life is yours!"

When I head to my dad's retirement celebration in a few weeks we will honor all of his years of service and ministry in the church. There will be people there that day who have looked up to my dad because of his faithfulness and his ability to teach Scripture. Some will likely remember the times my dad was there for them in a season of distress, or that he was willing to listen and give wise counsel when they needed it most. My dad has been a preacher for over 40 years, and that might cause some people to believe that he somehow deserves God's attention and respect. "All those years of service must have

earned him some of God's greatest affection," you might be tempted to think. Don't believe it for one minute.

My dad- just like Nicodemus, and just like you and me- is in desperate need of a grace that he could never deserve, never earn, and never gain on his own.

Please don't forget this: *"(Our) God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!)...God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it."* (Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9)