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Text: John 3:1-16

Time for Transformation

After a long winter, my old friend basked in the sunshine that marked the true arrival of spring in Boston. He watched the rays dance on the Charles before making his way to the Boston Common and then on to Old South Church in Copley Square. Once inside, he slipped into a back pew to rest his legs and appreciate the light flooding through the stained glass, alive with color.

Then he began to hear the organist practice. It was not going well at all. He would start strong before the notes began to slur together and finally come to a screeching, discordant halt. He huffed and puffed before plying his fingers and feet to the instrument again. This pattern repeated itself until finally the organist threw his music up in the air and cursed in utter frustration. He got up from the bench and paced around the sanctuary muttering to himself. He then took a seat in the front pew, head in hands for a long time. Then his teary eyes caught my friend sitting quietly in the corner.

The organist ambled over and asked him, "Did you see all of that?"

"No, of course not," my friend replied with a smirk.

"Good," said the organist, "sometimes it doesn't come to me too easily. Practice can be painful."

While I am not a musician, I can relate to the desire to get it right. I have moments where I put everything else in my life on hold to try to make things just so—for me it's usually words on a page. It can become so easy to focus on the minutiae that I lose track of the larger point. Whether in music, writing or in life, flourishing is intimately connected to prioritizing. There is only so much time, and we have to make decisions as to how to spend it best.

In today's scripture, Nicodemus simply doesn't understand Jesus because he's too focused on the wrong things. You might even call him a time-waster. Gifted with a precious encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus flatters him. Jesus, seeking to get him back on track, points him to the importance of the Kingdom of God and being born from above. Rather than focusing on transformation, Nicodemus asks about how he could possibly crawl back into his mother's womb. Not taking the bait, Jesus retorts that the work of the Spirit is a mystery, as difficult to pin down as the wind itself.

When Nicodemus still doesn't get it, Jesus cuts to the heart of John's Gospel: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." You see, God's love becomes flesh in Jesus and transforms the world forever. For John, if we trust in Christ's transformative power, we ourselves will be transformed, participate in that transformation, and thus live forever.

Even if you are like me and not overly focused on what happens after you die, you are probably interested in living life outside of the confines of time. Can you imagine not having to choose good over good but having enough time to experience it all? While we can taste moments of

such liberation in communion with the holy, one another, or even a beautiful piece of music, our reality is that we experience most of life as finite. Even Jesus had to decide how to make best use of limited time, and so do we.

The beauty of his path is that we walk it together. We no longer move as merely ourselves but as a unified body, freeing time for us to match our gifts with the world's needs, our gifts, and our personal joy. We don't have to do it all by ourselves; we instead find our part in a movement much bigger than ourselves, and adjust our priorities accordingly. It frees us to find eternal life in the here and now.

After a brief chat with my friend, the man made his way back to the organ bench to continue practicing. He pressed gently on the keys and pedals, and the pipes sang sweet harmonies. He started slowly and increased the tempo as he grew in confidence. His earlier focus on perfection kept him from playing his best. Taking a moment to walk, breathe, and let out some of his frustration gave him a chance to reset and reprioritize.

I envy this spiritual discipline of talented musicians. They appreciate the humanness of the endeavor. No different from any spiritual journey, their craft requires diligence and a willingness to accept our own limits in order to transcend them. They know when to press and when to make room for the Spirit to blow through and transform the situation.

Most importantly, they intuitively understand that their journey is not a goal to be accomplished but rather a process attended to. We misunderstand John's Gospel if we take our believing for granted. Lent is a season for us to slow down, pause, and reprioritize our loves in accordance with God's way. Even if our faith is our constant, it demands an openness to the Spirit's movement to respond with love to the constant flux around us. While the brokenness within us and around us will frustrate and lead us astray, the living Spirit of Christ will always draw us back to what is most important. Reprioritizing transforms not only our own lives but also the world around us.

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