What’s in a Word?

2 Lent

March 12, 2017

[A](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Lent/ALent2_RCL.html#ot1) Reading from Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

[Psalm 121](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Lent/ALent2_RCL.html#ps1) [Romans 4:1-5, 13-17](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Lent/ALent2_RCL.html#nt1) [John 3:1-17](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Lent/ALent2_RCL.html#gsp1)

What difference does a word make?

Sometimes plenty.

In today’s reading from John, Nicodemus comes to see Jesus at night. In other words, he’s afraid to be seen with Jesus during the day.

This makes me wonder: How often are *we* afraid to be seen with Jesus during the day?

No, I don’t mean we’re supposed to be standing on street corners shouting sin and salvation. I don’t mean we’re supposed to buttonhole people and ask them if they’re saved.

We, after all, are *Episcopalians*.

Episcopalians are like spies: we like to work undercover.

But even we Episcopalians, if we’re going to be with Jesus during the day, need to *act*.

Nicodemus today *acts*.

He acts even though he’s probably scared shitless.

But he *does* something.

But back to that word I asked about at the beginning of this sermon.

Nicodemus makes an odd statement to Jesus: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” What Nicodemus says is not a question per se—but in fact it *is* a question.

What exactly does he expect from Jesus? Does he want Jesus to say “Yep, that’s me, Nick. I’m God’s homie. I do all kinds of cool stuff. And I’ve got God right here in my hip pocket.”

Except the Palestinians of Jesus’ day didn’t wear pants, so they didn’t have pockets.

Typical of the way John portrays Jesus, Jesus answers Nicodemus with a non sequitur: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

This is the way the New Revised Standard Version translates Jesus’ response: “born from above.” But the New International Version has “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Not “born from above.” “Born again.”

Let’s look at that phrase. The Greek word *ánōthen* literally means “above from,” therefore “from above.” It occurs six times in John’s Gospel. It *never* means “again.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In fact, Nicodemus is perplexed, and gets befuddled. He misunderstands Jesus; he thinks Jesus *does* mean “again,” so in his confusion he exclaims “What? Can I jump back into my mother’s womb and be born again?”

But Jesus doesn’t mean “born again.” He means “born from above.”

OK, so why does one word matter?

John sees a divide, a great ditch, a chasm, between this world and God’s world above. In John’s Gospel, *ánōthen* is a synonym for “heaven.” For John, there’s a great divide between heaven and earth.

After Nicodemus’ uncomprehending question about crawling back into the womb, Jesus tells him explicitly: “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’”

John’s stark, almost punitive, dichotomy between flesh and spirit has always made me uncomfortable. It’s as though God and heaven were the head of a human body, the spirit, and the part below, what he calls “the flesh,” were the rest of the body. With his dualistic thinking John takes a great sword and lops the head off.

That, my friends, is tough love in extremis.

But we all know a decapitated corpse does not breathe; a headless body cannot live out the Gospel. We need *both* our spirit *and* our bodies.

In his letter, James uses “from above” only to make matters worse: a certain kind of “wisdom,” he says, “does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. . . . But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits. . . .”[[2]](#footnote-2)

You may be wondering why John and James make me uncomfortable. I’m troubled because they split asunder the seamless garment that is this wonderful and puzzling cosmos; they divide in order to conquer the psycho-somatic unity of body, soul, mind, and spirit.[[3]](#footnote-3)

But as Martin Luther King lived out for us, as he continues to *embody* for us, we are not incorporeal beings muddied by human corporeality; we are not angelic beings weighted down by matter, “the flesh,” as both James and Paul say.

When Martin Luther King marched against injustice and oppression, when people do so now, working for justice—Gospel justice—they put both body and soul on the line.

In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” King declares this explicitly in his call for “direct action”: “We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community.”

As King biblically saw, and sees for us now, bodies, by their action, can awaken conscience.

It saddens me to think that in many ways we are right now in the same situation of crisis as King and the freedom marchers were fifty years ago.

But my sadness has a responsibility. In his book *The Politics of Jesús*, Miguel de la Torre makes a very important point about the Incarnation. Our word “Incarnation,” through Latin, is related to the Spanish word *carne*, “meat.” In Spanish slang *un carnal* (pronounced *car-nál*) is your good buddy.

In today’s reading, King speaks of “the shadow of deep disappointment.” But it’s my responsibility to see that responsibility is the *carnal*, the buddy, of my own sorrow and disappointment right now. It is up to me, in prayer, in community, by faith—it is up to me, it is up to us, not to let sadness landslide into despair, into hopelessness and inaction.

I believe with all my heart, soul, and spirit that many actions of our federal government now are deeply, deeply immoral. They are anti-Gospel. On a daily basis this government crucifies God’s children. By doing so, on a daily basis this government crucifies Jesus.

But—but—Martin Luther King offers us hope: he offers us action: “Nonviolent direct action,” he says, “seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.” Nonviolent direct action, he continues, “seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.”

Isn’t this where we are now? In crisis? King was fully aware that his call for confrontation, his creation of tension, would scare many folks who always want the same ol’ same ol’. King tells us

My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.

The truth is, people of St. Paul’s, there is *never* a same ol’ same ol’: our society, just as our cells and our souls, is always changing. Brother Martin tells the truth: constructive, nonviolent tension is absolutely necessary for growth.

Most of you know that we’re considering becoming a sanctuary church. The Bishop told us at the deanery meeting here that he hopes our diocese becomes a sanctuary diocese.

We still have a lot of work to do, we still have much need of prayer, consultation, and discussion. Next Sunday after church, folks from Faith in Action and Faith in the Valley will offer us a workshop on Know Your Rights with regard to immigration. I hope you will all attend.

We are living now in what the New Testament calls *kairós*, a time of crisis, *and* a time of opportunity, “the right, proper, favorable time.” A time for Gospel action.

What’s in a word? *Kairós* tells us: plenty. Perhaps even everything.

Amen.

1. 3:3, 3: 7, 3:27, 3:31, 19:11, 19:23 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James 3:15, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Psycho-somatic: *psychḗ* (“*soul*, “*vital principle* in creatures”) and *sṓma* (body). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)