

Sermon May 31, 2015 Isaiah 6:1-8 John 3:1-17 "From Top to Bottom"

As she was facing death, elderly Nadine Stair from Kentucky wrote this poem:

"If I had my life to live over, I'd try to make more mistakes next time. I would relax, I would limber up, I would be crazier than I've been on this trip. I know very few things I'd take seriously any more.

I would take more chances, I would take more trips, I would scale more mountains, I would swim more rivers, and I would watch more sunsets. I would eat more ice cream and fewer beans. I would have more actual troubles and fewer imaginary ones.

You see... I was one of those people who lived prophylactically and sensibly and sanely, hour after hour and day after day.

Oh, I've had my moments

and if I had to do all over

again, I'd have many more of them.

In fact, I'd try not to have anything

else, just moments, one after another,

instead of living so many

years ahead of my day.

I've been one of those people who never went anywhere without

a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle, a

raincoat and a parachute. If I had it to do all over again,

I'd travel lighter, much lighter,

than I have.

I would start barefoot earlier in the spring, and I'd stay that way

later in the fall. And I would

ride more merry-go-rounds, and

catch more gold rings, and greet

more people, and pick more flowers,

and dance more often.

If I had it to do all over again.

But you see, I don't. "

(quoted by Bernie Siegel in *Peace, Love and Healing*)

Many years ago I remember reading an article in a magazine entitled, "If In Doubt, Do!" The article caught my eye since I had always been taught the old adage, "If in doubt, don't!" What the article was saying was much the same thing that Ms. Stair was lamenting in her poem--that so much of life is missed by our failure to accept and embrace the opportunities given to us. Certainly there are things we have said that we wish we had not said---but if we could sort it all out, there are probably *more* things that we wish we had said.

To this day, we're still trying to wrap our understanding around the Holocaust, where some 6 million Jews

(perhaps more) were rounded up and taken to their deaths in concentration camps. What was done was horrific, but what was not done and not said in the face of the horror is soul-boggling. Too many people refused to see or challenge what was being done.

These days whenever there is a disaster in our country or in some other, we want to respond, but there is a big question of HOW to respond. We sent all sorts of help to Haiti after their devastating earthquake in January of 2010, but since then concerns have been raised as to whether huge portions of the money actually ended up helping the people it was supposed to help. We want to help when something happens, like the earthquake in Nepal or the devastation in Texas, but we don't want to be hoodwinked! So it can be awfully easy to decide to do nothing. Someone once said, though, "If we err in trying, we err as humans; if we err by doing nothing, we become less than human." (Source unknown) While options are sometimes hard to sort out and involvement in foreign matters is often a messy undertaking; trying--doing something--is preferable to claiming that we can do nothing because we cannot see a clear solution before us. Sometimes we have to get our hands dirty and trust that God will work with and through us whether we see clear results or not.

In the first lesson, from the Book of Isaiah, we heard Isaiah's account of experiencing God's holy power and being cleansed as he realized his own lack of holiness in God's presence. When he understood that God needed somebody as he heard God say, "Whom shall I send?" Isaiah, instead of hanging back, trying to figure out exactly what was going on and whether or not he actually had the qualifications for the job, spoke right out: "Here am I; send me!" Isaiah didn't ask for a defined assignment – "What am I going to have to do? How long will this take? Do I really have the qualifications for this job?" Instead, he jumped in and offered himself to God's service.

We know how Isaiah's life turned out, that his life was used in a huge way to proclaim God's challenges and offers of comfort to the chosen people and even to the world. God did it, but first Isaiah had to say YES, he had to trust something he couldn't grasp.

Now consider Nicodemus. I identify more with him than I do with Isaiah, because Nicodemus was a cautious man. Late one night Nicodemus, a well-respected leader of the synagogue, approached Jesus and asked him what he, Nicodemus, had to do in order to enter the kingdom of God. Basically, his question was, "How can I earn it?" Jesus told him three things: "You have to be born from above.. You have to get the Spirit... and The wind blows where it will." Nicodemus came to Jesus seeking light, asking what he needed to do. Jesus answered with surprising images: birth, spirit and wind.

Several years ago preacher William Willimon wrote his own interpretation of their conversation that night, which I share with you now: ""You want to get into the Kingdom? Simple. Just be born from above." Nicodemus replied, "Well, how can you do that? Can you teach an old dog new tricks? Can you squeeze back into your mother's womb and be born a second time?"

Jesus said, "You can squeeze through your mother's womb about as easily as you can squeeze yourself into God's Kingdom. You have to be born, not again, but from above. (The Greek word is *anōthen*, which means "from above" or "from top to bottom." The same word was used on Good Friday when it was said that the veil of the temple was torn *anōthen*, from top to bottom.) Nicodemus, you must be born from above, from the top down, from top to bottom."

But as so often happens in John's gospel, somebody hears but doesn't hear all that well. When Jesus first said born "from above," Nicodemus thought he heard him say "again." How can you be born a second time? No, Jesus said, I said, from above.

Willimon continues with commentary: "Isn't it interesting, that when people talk about this passage today, making it the very hallmark of the Christian faith, the one and necessary path to the Kingdom, they often speak of this the way Nicodemus misunderstood it rather than the way Jesus depicted it. They say, "You must be born again." Like a second time or something. No, Jesus said. "You must be born from above." Flesh is flesh, but Spirit is Spirit. What God wants to do with you is a renovation involving an attic to basement overhaul. Top to Bottom.

(W. Willimon, "Pulpit Resource" Vol. 22, No. 2 1994)

(pause)

The Holy Power of God is at work among us in ways we cannot control or earn or even explain... Herein is the power for each of us to be born from above, renovated from top to bottom, made effective for God's purposes. When this happens, we will BE in the Kingdom of God.

Catherine Livingston Garrettson was a Methodist Episcopal mystic who, by her ministry within the confines of the accepted domestic role of women in her day, paved the way for later women to envision themselves as ordained ministers. Born into a wealthy family in the Hudson River Valley in **1759**, Catherine's sheltered life was shattered by the Revolutionary War as it took several of her male relatives and brought about the torching of her home in 1777 by the British. Later, the sudden, unexpected death of her dearest friend, Mary Rutherford, plunged Catherine into the sense that nothing is reliable or stable in the world. She realized that nothing, not wealth, not friendship, not youth, could fend off death. Aching with grief and depression, Catherine withdrew into solitude and prayer. On October 13, 1788, the day before her 35th birthday, while reading and praying the liturgy of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, the Spirit of God reached her heart and gave her a life-changing experience.

"I had scarcely begun to pray," Catherine wrote in her journal, "when suddenly a song of praise and thanksgiving was put in my mouth - my sins were pardoned, my state was changed; my soul was happy. In a transport of joy I sprang from my knees, and happening to see myself as I passed the looking glass I could not but look with surprise at the change in my countenance. All things were made new." (from *Spirituality and Social Responsibility: Vocational Vision of Women in the United Methodist Tradition*, ed by R.S. Keller) God made Catherine new!!

Here's an illustration I have told even in this church before, but I love it, so you get to hear it again: In a seminary missions class, Herbert Jackson told how, as a new missionary, he was assigned a car that would not start without a push. After pondering his problem, he devised a plan. He went to the school near his home, got permission to take some children out of class, and had them push his car off. As he made his rounds, he would either park on a hill or leave his car running. He used this ingenious procedure for two years.

Ill health forced the Jackson family to leave, and a new missionary came to that station. Jackson showed his replacement around, and proudly began to explain his arrangement for getting the car started. As the new man listened to his words, he went and looked under the hood of the car. Before the explanation was complete, the new missionary interrupted, "Why Dr. Jackson, I believe the only trouble is this loose cable." He gave the cable a twist, stepped into the car, pushed the switch, and to Jackson's astonishment, the

engine roared to life.

For two years needless trouble had become routine. The power was there all the time, available, but not connected. A loose connection had kept Jackson from putting the power to work. In J.B. Phillips' translation of Ephesians 1:19-20 it says, "How tremendous is the power available to us who believe in God." "Here I am, make me new, use me, Lord. Re-work me, top to bottom."

Sometimes churches seem to have "loose connections," where we are sort of like the bubble solution I used in the children's time. If the solution is simply poured into a vessel to sit there, it's worthless! But if it is infused with the breath of God, the church can bubble over with life and hope and renewal, TOP to bottom!!

For God so loves the world, that we are called to and embraced in the Life and Grace of Jesus. May your life be renovated from top to bottom by the Holy Power of God as you say to God, "Here am I." May we all make more mistakes, have more moments, and LIVE trusting in the Holy Power of God as we ask him to make us more like Jesus. Amen.