

When Faith goes Undercover

When I first decided to leave the Catholic Church in order to pursue my call to the priesthood, I was working full time as the faith formation director at one of only two Catholic Churches in my little town. I knew that if word got out that I was contemplating attending a church in another denomination, I would be fired. And I wasn't quite ready to leave my job before I had another one to take its place. For many, many years I had been hesitant to leave the faith tradition I was formed in.

I had received all my sacraments in it and was raising my children in it. I attended Catholic Schools from grade 1 to 12 and had done my advanced degree work at a Catholic college. I had worked for the Catholic Church on the local and national levels. Leaving it would affect not only me, but my family, my parishioners, my friendships. There was a lot on the line.

So I began to meet with the priest at St Andrew's, the nearby Episcopal Church, under cover of darkness, or at least I was sneaky about it. I made my visits in the evenings or on my days off, telling no one why I was visiting.

I remember sitting in the office of Fr. Charles, the interim rector at St. Andrew's, and tearfully telling him about my call to leave the Catholic Church. He had a beautiful black Labrador retriever that stayed in his office, and I wrapped my arms around it and sobbed into its neck as I spoke. Because I loved my church community and the people I served. I loved the theology that formed my faith and I loved the courageous peers who pushed back on the doctrines that we felt had to change.

But I also knew that my call came from God. And I knew a call to the priesthood had to be tested.

I will tell you that it was not all resolved in one visit under the cover of darkness. And so I went, weak after weak to talk to Father Charles, to weep into his dog, and to figure out how to leave a church and join another. It took me a long time, many years in fact, to see the world through lenses other than the ones I was raised with. It took me a long time to let go of prejudices and fears that were part of my formation, to understand fully what I could release and what I could hold close to my hear..

I think it probably took Nicodemus more than one night as well. So I get Nicodemus, I really do. I think John deals a little harshly with him in today's gospel, where he is made to look a little spineless, sneaking around at night, afraid to be seen with Jesus in the cold light of day. Jesus certainly has a lively back and forth at his expense.

But Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leader of Israel, had a lot to lose if he made the wrong move. And Israel did too. So he was cautious. He was checking things out, bringing some of his cards to the table, but perhaps not showing all of them.

“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,” he says to Jesus. What he doesn’t say is: But we are not at all sure what God is doing; we are not certain about what we are looking at here.”

And that is the question that Jesus answers.

What God is doing here, is inviting you to see the way into God’s Kingdom, Jesus says. What God is doing is opening those doors to everyone who would like to enter. It will involve heaven and earth coming together in such a way that a new doorway is formed through the Son of Man, through Jesus, himself.

This is how God loves the World, Jesus says.

What Jesus doesn’t say is: if you are afraid that everything is going to change, you are right.

Because that goes without saying.

If we really trust in the gospel of Jesus Christ, if we really believe in the love story that God tells in Jesus, then we have to be prepared for the end of the world. Because God’s world remakes the ones that we are most accustomed to – be they religious, or familial, or political, or economic.

In this season of Lent we turn the heat up on our prayer, and our self emptying and our outward giving, and we prepare for the end of the world, and we make way for the new one that replaces it. Because everything changes when the gospel becomes the world that you work out of. It has always been this way.

In the early church, joining the Jesus movement had profound impacts on people’s lives, as they left old religious practices, or saw former things turning into something new. People who engaged in the religious traditions of Greece and Rome left behind their pantheon of gods, as well as their political and family connections in a system where the emperor had godly status. And members of Israel who saw the divinity of God in Jesus developed a new way of understanding the Oneness of God that many of their peers could not accept. These were very real conflicts, life or death conflicts. At the time of John’s Gospel, the community of John believed firmly and inflexibly that Jesus was divine, and they were in serious conflict with their fellow Jews, to the point of being expelled from the Synagogues. That is why the author of the Gospel of John can be so condemning of “the Jews”; he is not naming the entire religious tradition here, but the people of Israel that he disagrees with.

And don’t forget that not long before this Gospel was written, Rome had sacked Jerusalem, expelled Israel and destroyed the temple.

If we’re honest, really applying the values of the gospel profoundly threatens the world that we know. The gospel threatens the worship of other gods – and by this I don’t mean the ways other faith traditions understand divinity, I mean gods like Professional Sports; Corporate wealth and greed; Extractive industries, . I mean gods like the love of war and violence, the gods of Whiteness, Power and Privilege and Christian nationalism.. These are the real contenders for the spot of Most High. And you only need to read the paper to understand what happens to people who challenge them.

So we know what is at stake when someone like Jesus comes along and suggests we live out of an entirely different world, or Kingdom. And that's why during Lent we engage in our temptation resistance training, we give our alms, we pray like crazy. It's all practice for moving into God's Kingdom.

The biggest tool that we need in the spiritual toolbox is to believe in God. And that admittedly sounds a little trite. It's practically an interview question on a first date – do you believe in God? But I don't mean the belief that there is a God, or some vague idea that divine benevolence makes everything OK. I mean the kind of belief that you base life decisions on – the belief that prompts one to move to a new place or leave careers or change religions. This is the belief that prompted Abraham to leave the home of his ancestors in Ur of the Chaldeans and take his family to an unknown place, as he obeyed the voice of a God he had never encountered before. His was belief that preceded religion, St. Paul explains. It's the kind of belief that allowed a new people to form and expand from just one believing couple, Abraham and Sarah.

This was also the belief that prompted Nicodemus to visit Jesus under cover of night, because as a leader of Israel he really did know when the God he believed in was doing something new. He knew his people's story and the way God loved the world. His belief made him pay attention.

This is the belief that our Lenten practice calls us to. Everything changes with Easter. So we might as well be ready for all God has in store for us when Easter comes around again.

Amen.