

I want to tell you about Vern Hopkins. Vern was a member of Osoyoos United Church where I spent three years as a student minister. Vern loved two things. He loved children – he delighted in their wisdom, their questions, the innocence and their capacity to understand the deepest mysteries. He also loved the earth. He delighted in everything about God’s creation and when he got to put the two together, teaching children to love the earth, he vibrated in right vocation.

Vern became one of about 18 members of the congregation who registered for a 30 week Introduction to the Bible course I taught over two years, as one of my own learning goals. Early in the program we explored the first creation story, the one about how everything was created...with each evolutionary leap ending with “and there was morning and evening – the first day” or second...etc.

I was explaining that long before the days of scientific explanation, eons before there were academic disciplines – the sciences, physics, math, - people had the same questions we do. Why is the sky blue? Where do birds come from? Why do we love? When I imagined for Vern that perhaps the only people with explanations then were mystics and storytellers, and that much of what we understand of the creation stories is not science, but mythology, he was saucer eyed. “You mean I can finally reconcile what I know to be true of the science of the earth, with what I believe about the creative genius of God?” God’s creation continued to be a source of inspiration and learning for Vern, even to his death and I got re-count that story at his memorial service.

Vern has always reminded me of Nicodemus. We are re-introduced to Nicodemus every three years in the lectionary cycle in the season of lent. We only meet Nicodemus in the gospel of John. There is no other corresponding story in the synoptic gospels. So this gospel writer is telling this story because it contributes to his theological agenda.

It’s the gospel of John that we hear Jesus say things like:

“The spirit of God is within you.”

“Greater things than these (things Jesus did) shall you do in my name.”

“I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.”

Today we hear Jesus say to Nicodemus “what is born of flesh is flesh, what is born of Spirit is Spirit. And the Spirit blows where it will. God so LOVED the world that he

gave his son that whoever BELIEVES will have LIFE. Indeed God did NOT send the son to CONDEMN the world but to SAVE it.”

Before we roll our eyes at a text that has caused deep division in the world, let's make sure we know what we're talking about. The word save, in the original Greek is “sozo” and one of its meanings is healing, to end suffering. So listen again to what John puts in Jesus' mouth.

“The spirit of God is within you.”

“Greater things than these (things Jesus did) shall you do in my name.”

“I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.”

“God did not send the son to condemn the world but to heal it.”

What is this writer's theological agenda, inserting into Jesus' mouth, these deeply incarnational concepts, when they appear nowhere else in the scriptures? What is the gospel writer up to?

Nicodemus is a highly respected and beloved Pharisee who is steeped in right practice, right belief, and the right way of doing things. These four sentences seem to blow all of that out of the water. When Nicodemus asks in complete and honest doubt “How can these things be,” Jesus responds with equal and honest doubt “you are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things?”

Do you hear that? It's incredulous to Jesus. “You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things.” It's like Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, ‘deep within the Jewish tradition you will find this teaching.’ Now doesn't that create a desire to re-think and learn again the ancient Hebrew texts? It sure does me.

My point this morning is this. Gone are the days, long gone, long gone in Nicodemus' time are the days, when one right practice, one right belief, one right way holds any promise. In fact, we are discovering in our denomination that even our own one right way is flawed. A conservative, evangelical who has a deeply practiced, deeply faithful and legitimate understanding of the tradition is not very welcome in United Church circles. Ask any of those who joined the committee of concern in the late 80's in response to our open ordination of gays and lesbians.

We are also discovering here in Lynn Valley that the church does not have a corner on the market of spiritual practice. The spirit is working where it will. We are discovering that people outside our walls are finding all sorts of ways to have their spiritual questions accompanied. Y Yoga. Energetic Spas. On line with Deepak Chopra.

Seventy percent of resources borrowed from libraries are written by the non-church spiritual gurus of our time – Eckhart Tolle, Deepak Chopra, Marianne Williamson, Neale Donald Walsch, Louise, Hay, the Dalai Lama, Stephen Covey, Carolyn Myss – all re-writing this Nicodemus story for our time.

And their work is deeply embedded in the religious traditions of the world – certainly our Christian tradition.

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There is nothing about right belief, right practice, right way in any of that. Neale Donald Walsh wrote “on a blessed future you will begin to believe in a limitless God who can appear in any form, under any circumstances, to any person, and indeed, to all people, in all places all the time.”

I met a fellow in Mexico this year who believed he had no spiritual practice, and certainly didn’t believe in God. And yet he practices Yoga three times a week. He walks the beach faithfully every morning to reflect on the rhythm of the waves crashing upon the sand. And he is an amateur photographer. His photographs of people, of people’s relationship to the creation, of colour, and contrasts, reveal a deep sense of respect for and wonder at the created order. In my mine mind he has a deep spiritual practice.

Jesus says to Nicodemus “Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” God will always show up, wherever and whenever she chooses, and in whatever form meets people where they are.

And we as a congregation, are discovering this collectively. We were church in a particular way. Set. Established. Comfortable. Along comes an upstart minister who sees the exodus from our pews and wonders out loud where Spirit is moving, and sees the signs and wonders beyond this church. You’ve been invited to wonder about that too and to wonder what it means, what it costs, to be different. How do we be different?

And it's like for the past five years we have huddled in Jesus' company at night, daring to ask "how shall we be different?" "What kind of church do we need to be?" What is God calling US to be now?" And while we've been doing that we have grown and are growing our capacities for spiritual practice.

I know that Tuesday's public hearing was largely frustrating for many people, particularly for the Property Redevelopment Committee and our development partner. They have shouldered most of the heavy lifting in getting us to Tuesday night. But look what we are becoming in the wake of all of this? Think how much more skilled we are than we were five years ago. We have grown capacities for compassion, for holding space while others do what they need to do, for deep listening, for articulating our faith, and our values and our call to serve the community.

Friends, be not afraid. Set down your frustration, your lament, your doubt. We have a beautiful project. We have faithful leaders. We have each other and because we are being born of Spirit, we are being carried by the Spirit who is moving where it will. God is showing up in ways we least expected. How cool is that. Amen!