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John 3.1-17

“See Directions on Back of Box”

I want to show you something [a box of mac-n-cheese]. This is the hidden source of my cooking expertise. Not only are the most important ingredients right here on the inside, the instructions for making this staple meal are right on the back. Now, my repertoire is not limited to mac-n-cheese, of course, because there are other things that you can find in the grocery with step-by-step directions clearly displayed on the back of the box. Every once in a while, I get adventuresome by opening our recipe card file box and making something from one of the cards in the box—usually the one with the fewest steps.

I think cooking is a little scary. I don't know exactly why, but maybe that's why when I cook I must have the box or the recipe card within a clear line of sight at all times. Many of our recipe cards, in fact, are adorned with thumb-sized grease and/or tomato stains, because I can't seem to bear to put the card down even while actually putting the ingredients together. It's reassuring to have the directions right there, promising that the mess I am making will actually yield something that someone can eat.

I think that there may be a similar dynamic at work in religion today. Times are a little scary. One of the things that we Americans seem to be divided about, in fact, is which thing we ought to be the most frightened about. Global terrorism or global recession? Not enough spending or not enough saving? Rogue states or rogue immigrants or rogue corporations? Falling property values or rising health care costs? There is a lot to be afraid of, and there are myriads of mistakes to be made and all kinds of missteps to be taken.

Added to all of that is the disturbing fact that religion, that sanctuary which houses eternal truths and sturdy traditions, is in a time of transition. People's religious habits and expectations have shifted dramatically. There are myriads of choices to be made, and it feels like the ground is too uncertain for us not to take dangerous missteps.

And so what happens when we feel afraid and uncertain? What do we do when we have a bunch of ingredients in front of us and we don't know quite what we can do with them, or when we don't know whether anyone will eat what we have made? We keep our eyes glued to the recipe. We don't let it out of our hands. We smudge it with tomato paste or melted butter, if need be, but we don't let it go at any cost. In the midst of chaos and threat, many in our world today are clinging to recipe religion, with all the steps laid out clearly, with all the questions answered unambiguously, with all the ingredients exactly measured, and with all the uncertainty and all the mystery carefully excluded. We have four “spiritual laws” and forty “days of purpose.” We have the “prayer of Jabez” guaranteeing personal success and detailed forecasts of the future of the world narrated in Christian fiction. Above all, perhaps, we have the Bible, transformed from a mystery-laden witness to God's challenging and life-giving presence amidst the people of God into a set of clear, unambiguous directions: a kind of divine recipe file by means of which we may produce one perfect copy of the Christian life after another.

We aren't the first to do that. Nicodemus was looking through the recipe box for right religion, too. There was a lot of fear in the air when Nicodemus came to Jesus in the middle of the night to ask him if he were the one they were waiting for. He came at night, because he did not want to bring attention to himself. The Romans were watching. Anxious Jews were watching, too, and Nicodemus wanted to proceed cautiously. What he seems to have wanted were clear answers to vexing questions about the future of Israel and about the proper shape of Jewish faith. Just give it to me straight, Jesus. Lay it out for me plainly and simply.

I'm glad Nicodemus came to Jesus that night, because his questions provoked some of the most powerful words of Scripture. Verse 16: “For God so love the world that he gave his only begotten Son.” But this same mini-

lecture in which we find those words is also full of words that Nicodemus found disquieting, anxiety-provoking. “You must be born from above.” “The spirit blows where it wills.” I want to focus on the first, the one that Nicodemus attempts to dispute and also the one which is such a rallying cry for so many Christians today.

It is ironic, I think, that so many in our time would use Jesus’ language about being “born from above” or “born again” as a description of the chief ingredient in a recipe religion. Being “born again” means praying a certain prayer that follows a certain formula which embodies the certain acceptance of certain doctrines. Being born again means being counted on to vote a certain way and to use a certain kind of standardized language and to value certain rituals that claim not to be rituals at all. Being born again means having a certain private experience which gives you certain esoteric knowledge which you can hold, unlike the rest of us, with absolute certainty. Being born again, in short, means being *certain*, having moved beyond or above all the wonder and mystery of life, having all the questions answered and all the debates settled.

And here’s the irony of it. This kind of recipe religion that requires a healthy amount of spiritual rebirth appeals to words of Jesus but is actually much closer to the fear that provoked the nocturnal approach of Nicodemus. Nicodemus, it seems to me, is the perfect symbol for modern religion, the kind of faith that tries to replace faith with knowledge. We modern people would like to squeeze uncertainty out of our lives for good. We want moral clarity rather than complexity, and we crave religious certainty rather than mystery. We want those things, I believe, because we fear the consequences of not knowing everything. When both religion and morality have lost their sure footing in a culturally shared consensus, it seems intolerable to have to admit to being in the dark. So we approach Jesus in the dark and ask—no, we demand!—to enjoy access to the unclouded truth. And we call that being “born again.”

But what about the rest of us? What about those whom American psychologist William James called “once-born,” those who have not transcended the uncertainties of life, and who are doubtful that it is really possible to do so? I believe Jesus words’ here point to another way, a different kind of spiritual re-birth. In his book, *The Dishonest Church*, pastor Jack Good describes a kind of faith that is “chaos-tolerant.” That is, there is a way of believing and living with faith that does not seek to banish uncertainty from religion and morality, but rather to live with uncertainty in a creative and faithful way. Most Christians today who talk about the necessity of being “born again” are “chaos-intolerant.” Faith, for them, is a way of short-circuiting hard questions and side-stepping dangerous self-reflection. Faith is a way of escape, a refuge from the chaos of life in a threatening world.

But for those who are, as Jesus put it to Nicodemus, “blown about by the Spirit,” faith is something very different. It is the courage to embrace hard questions and to follow our hearts and minds wherever they may lead us as we face those questions with honesty and integrity. For those who are born of the Spirit, faith doesn’t close us off from the world, but opens us to the world in a more profound way. Faith doesn’t restrict our loves—it *unrestricts* them, bearing our fears away and opening us toward people and ideas and possibilities that may have seemed a threat before we began to see them with the eyes of faith.

Being born anew in *this* way is scary, I’ll admit, and I can certainly understand why so many prefer something somewhat less. But the interesting thing about Jesus’ challenge to Nicodemus is that, even though it sounds so strange and so forbidding, it is actually the nearest possibility for each of us. This kind of spiritual re-birth is about being yourself rather than some kind of concoction of someone else’s expectations. This kind of spiritual rebirth is about having your own faith rather than one you have to read off the back of a box. This kind of rebirth is a way of learning to enjoy home cooking, throwing in a few spices as seems best, creating your own dish: fresh, unique, unrepeatable.

The truth about the Spirit of God is that the surest signpost of the Spirit’s activity is precisely this uniqueness. God doesn’t seem to have any interest in churning out spiritual copies. Copies are made by us, when originality seems a threat, when we live in fear. God’s Spirit, on the other hand, creates originals. God’s Spirit makes us bold, frees us to be ourselves and to experience God in the unique ways that reflect our unique gifts.

Traditional Lenten disciplines of the spirit often involve giving things up. But it is important to recognize that giving things up is only valuable insofar as it leaves room for adding new things that can draw our hearts to God. Maybe we might consider giving up our recipes, whatever they happen to be, so we can learn how to cook with our own wisdom, in the power of the Spirit. At least once, I think I'll try my own version of mac-n-cheese. I'll let you know how it turns out. Amen.