

Between the Inevitable and the Unpredictable

John 3:1-16

During my final semester of divinity school, I took a required course titled “Shaping Christian Institutions.” One of those big, important sounding classes that you take to learn how to be the minister of a very large church or the president of a university. It also kind of sounds like it’s about how to manage a Chick-Fil-A. The central question of the class was around a wave of anti-institutional sentiment had swept the country. People are leaving institutions. They’ve abandoned political parties. They’re not trusting their governments both local and national. They’re leaving churches and rotary clubs. Why is it that at this time, people don’t seem to be into institutions?

In our text today, Nicodemus is an Institution Guy, “a leader of the Jews,” who we later learn has some pull in the religious and political courts. Nicodemus is in upper middle management of the religious and political life. While he knows that things could be better, he’s devoted to maintaining the sometimes uneasy alliance between his religion and the rest of society. The institutions of which he’s a part may not be perfect, but they keep the order, they help people to worship God faithfully, and give people hope that one day could be a little better. He’s been at it for a long time, and looks forward to reaping the rewards of his devotion and commitment to God, family, and country. For his whole life, the temple, the courts, every institution of which he’s been a part has generally worked for his benefit.

But there’s something about this Jesus guy. Nicodemus knows that whatever he’s up to, it can’t happen apart from “the presence of God.” But what has Jesus been up to?

Shortly before meeting with Nicodemus that night, Jesus upended the institution of which he was a part. In the Temple, Jesus witnesses the money changers, the people exploiting the poor in the very heart of where they should be proclaiming the equality of all. Rather than preaching good news to the poor and freedom for the captives, the money changers are looking to make a buck off of people. We often like to think of Jesus as the meek, and mild-mannered guy that told the little children to come to him. He’s the guy with smooth skin and kind eyes that looked with compassion on a sickly woman. And to be sure, these are all signs of God’s presence in the world. But they are signs amongst others. What does it show about God that Jesus marches into the Temple, fashions a whip, and drives out the money changers and why was Nicodemus drawn to it?

And maybe this meant something for Nicodemus. He wasn't ready to join Jesus's disciples in the open, but he'd caught glimpses of the ways in which his institutions weren't all they were cracked up to be. He saw how they'd been harmful to people that weren't on top. Maybe every day he'd shown up with just a little bit of anger in the back of his mind while he saw people give away the few dollars they had out of the belief that doing so was the only way they could get closer to God.

Maybe you've caught such a glimpse. Maybe at your institution, you've seen how workers aren't treated well. Maybe you've seen how people are exploited or taken advantage of. You've seen how introducing the need to make money changes things. For me it was talking to our youth on our youth retreat as they described the ways their school lives have changed. I have here a copy of our County's course listings for high school students. It's 43 pages long and includes "career clusters." What's it doing to our youth that they have to think about making money at an earlier and earlier age? That they worry about their grades and then have them texted directly to them on their phones?

And so Nicodemus wants change and thinks there's something that Jesus is up to that will lead to it. So he goes to the source.

Jesus delivers some bad news: if you want to see the Kingdom, you have to let go of everything. You have to be willing to be born anew, to start over.

But how is such change possible Nicodemus asks?

It's a question most of us around here are asking right now "How do we change? What's our vision of the Kingdom of God? What will it look like?" Like those of us gathered around the table in my Shaping Christian Institutions class, we know that things can't stay the same, and we're trying to figure out it will take for them to change.

Most theories of institutional change go like this. Both people and institutions take time to change. The best way for leaders to direct them through change is a kind of slow and steady movement. Introduce a new idea here. Start a new program there. Engage in meaningful conversation with people from across the aisle. Don't be too extreme or too fast. Slow down, let everyone catch up, and make sure no one is left behind. Then repeat. Slowly but surely, people and the institutions of which they are a part will come to realize

that they've changed even if it's just a little bit here or there. For the past 35 years, this is how leaders, CEOs, non-profit executive directors, pastors and politicians have been taught that change happens in our world. It was the basic operating theory of how Christian Institutions are shaped in the class I took in divinity school.

Now, I'm no doctor, and I've never had a child push out of my body. But that theory of change doesn't sound much like what I know about the birthing process. My understanding of giving birth is that it's messy. It's a painful process. And if all goes according to plan, it's over relatively quickly. Slow and steady progress over a number of years is how growth happens, but it's not how new life enters the world. It's not how we come to see the Kingdom of God.

And the other thing about birth, is that it's dangerous, both mother and child might not make it to the other side. Jesus seems to recognize the danger that comes with re-birth, with salvation, with the potential for eternal life. He tells Nicodemus that the Son of Man must be lifted up like a snake in the wilderness. This isn't how leaders change the world. Leaders, whether they be individuals or institutions, don't look like a snake hanging up in the wilderness. It's a little like someone saying "Come follow me! One day I'll get shot down like a dog in the streets." I'd prefer they give a TED talk. Leadership isn't ugly like that. So Jesus presents Nicodemus with a rather distressing prospect: if you really want change, if you really want life to its fullest you'll have to follow me all the way to the cross.

And this is a frightening prospect for Nicodemus. He's got a lot to lose. Like I said, he's upper middle management. He could lose his job, his reputation. What if he's seen associating with Jesus? What might they do to him? He's meeting with Jesus at night so just in case they put Jesus up on a cross, they won't come for Nicodemus too.

You see most people in the world want change. Just so long as nothing has to be different.

I'd like to return to the question I ended my illustrious divinity school career on: why are people abandoning institutions?

It's a question I've pondered since I graduated, and while I've served both at First Baptist Greensboro and here. The way I've come to put it is this. Just about everyone I know is

suffering from what I call “The 4 I’s.” I’m a baptist pastor so I’m actually legally obligated to use alliteration at least once per sermon. The 4 I’s are Inequality, Instability, Isolation, and Inevitability. I won’t go into detail on each but will say that I can see some of you giving me a puzzled look and some of you nodding along.

Inequality - In 1973, the average household spent 50% of their yearly budget on fixed costs like housing, healthcare, and education. By 2003, they spent 75% of their budget on those things. The minimum wage peaked in 1968. This makes me think about the guy that came by the church needing help with a light bill. He works full-time for the company the city outsources their street cleanup to making \$9/hour. He showed me 6 weeks worth of pay stubs and at full-time, his take home pay was \$525.85 for two weeks.

Instability - By 2020, there will be more restaurant jobs than manufacturing. Think about the Reynolds factory where once people worked Monday through Friday from 9 - 5. I think of the number of bars and restaurants opening up in our city. The number of healthcare workers. Each of these have schedules (and thus pay periods) that shift leaving them vulnerable to having to pay off a big expense at the wrong time.

Isolation - Pretty much all of our solutions the first two problems focus on individuals effort or know how. This makes me think of the friend of mine living on \$725/month for disability who recently discovered that the U.S. Treasury was taking \$100/month out of his paycheck to pay off a \$3,000 student loan from 1982.

And, finally, when inequality combines with instability and you’re all alone, all of this just feels inevitable. People don’t believe change is possible. They don’t believe the future is more full of light than the present. They think that the future is just one of perishing.

John Maynard Keynes is quoted as saying “The inevitable generally does not happen, because the unpredictable prevails instead.”

Friends, I believe people are abandoning our institutions because our institutions have accepted the inevitable. Like Nicodemus, they hear about Jesus and the change that he offers, the hope that he gives to the world and they ask “How is this possible? How could this be?” For many that are leaving the church it’s not because they don’t believe in God, it’s because they don’t believe it makes a difference. If the church, our church has

anything to offer the world it's this: the unpredictable. You see for some, "no one can see the Kingdom of God unless you lose everything and are born again," is scary. But for others, they hear it "When you see the Kingdom of God, you *get* to lose everything and start again."

So what would this look like? What would an institution look like that prepared itself to be the unpredictable?

Well I think if you take the 4 I's and reverse them, you get an institution quite unlike any other that exists in the lives of 99% of people at the moment, one that most people wouldn't predict could exist.

So what kind of people would it take to pull that off? Well I think you'd have to have a group of people with a particular set of values.

For instance, if a church truly said we'll be a place of equality, and we can't live equally when some of us have taken out massive debts for school, for healthcare. So a church committed to equality might try to remedy that. Well, that church would need to believe that God had given the church community as a whole more money than they collectively need. And if they believed that, they'd then need to be a church that values *giving abundantly*.

Or let's say this same church realized that they lived in a city with a massive food insecurity problem. Food insecurity isn't the same as hunger. It's the inability to buy food at the right time. And so a church might use its resources to tackle the problem of income instability believing that peace is greater than the stress caused by worrying about paying for food. If a church were to try to pull this off, I imagine you'd look at their life and conclude that they must value *walking with the hurting*.

And maybe alongside this, the church realizes that what people are missing in their lives is community, the ability to share things in common with one another. They come to see that the way that our world is setup is to ensure that we think, believe, and act like singular, isolated beings and this in turn is leading us to parish. So such a church begins the radical act of sharing and giving to one another to ensure that all of this works and that the burdens borne by the individuals can be relieved by the community. Well such a church would surely have to value *belonging to God and one another*.

I know that inequality, isolation, and instability feel like massive problems. They are. They seem inevitable. And part of what makes them seem inevitable is the reflex we all share when presented with big, imaginative, frightening, and thrilling prospects of change: yeah, right. People won't go for that. It won't work. What if we fail? Surely we can't be the ones to pull that off. But friends, I have good news for you. We might fail. But we are a church that values *risking willingly*. And even though there's really no blueprint out there for how to do this, we value *leading courageously*. And even though we might not have it in us right now, we are a people that value *being transformed to do God's work of love in the world*. That is, we might fail, but we also might be transformed in such a way that people believe that even though perishing seems inevitable, God loves this world so very, very much that whosoever enters into the unpredictability of belief in God will have life so strong, powerful, and beautiful that even death can't conquer it.

After Jesus' death, a group of men gather and take him off the cross and take him out to bury him. One of them was Nicodemus. He stepped out of the shadows and identified himself with Jesus at his lowest, darkest hour. Think of the looks he got. Betraying his institution. But we know how the story ends. Death couldn't conquer Jesus, and Jesus wasn't done with Nicodemus. And he's not done with us.