

Leading a Devotional at the beginning of a meeting this week, we read from Sarah Young's Jesus Calling instruction to "Make Friends with the Problems in your life." Years ago I had a good friend who was a retired teacher and always afraid her doctor was going to find a problem with her heart. Sure enough, she went in for a routine physical, and the doctor not only identified she had an irregular heartbeat, she had blockages and needed to wear an external monitor. She was livid! This was exactly what she did not want. One evening at a restaurant with her daughter, my friend's cell-phone rang and not recognizing the number she deleted it. Then it rang again. Then her daughter's phone began ringing and the daughter took the call. The Medical Office reported that according to the Monitor the Teacher was about to have a major coronary event and they needed to get to the Emergency room immediately. I should state that my friend was quite irritated to have to abandon her dessert. While in the midst of correcting the heart problem the Cardiologist discovered that she also had the beginnings of an aggressive cancer. Suddenly, my friend realized that had she not had the Heart problem she would not have had the Monitor, had she not had the problem of the Monitor she did not want she would have died from a Coronary, and had she not had the problem of Heart Surgery she would not have known about the Cancer. I finish that story by stating 20 yrs later she is still a healthy 97 who volunteers every year at the school where she had taught.

The story of Nicodemus is a favorite for many of us, both for the Born-Again reference and for John 3:16's "For God So loved the World that he gave his only begotten son." Yet, this morning I want to pay attention to something different about this, because arguing about being BORN AGAIN, and quoting SCRIPTURE still do not address Nicodemus' underlying problem in the story.

Nicodemus was a leader among the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin, and word of this Jesus had become a problem for them. We know this is a major problem for Nicodemus, because he does not seek Jesus out on the road or at the Temple, he comes at Night in the cover of darkness where Nicodemus can hide from the rest of the world. His problem is he is complaining about what Jesus is doing, Nicodemus knows Jesus comes from GOD! HOWEVER, the real problem for Nicodemus is not only that he is meeting with Jesus in secret, not only that Jesus is creating problems for the Jewish Council, not only that Nicodemus knows Jesus comes from GOD... All of his life, Nicodemus has treated faith in God as something you could learn, knowing the LAW you could be RIGHT; YET Jesus demand of Nicodemus is that we live SPIRITUALLY.

We must live our lives and all our actions as a relationship with GOD. The lesson Jesus is teaching this teacher, is that it is not enough to know the Law, to be Circumcised, to be Kosher, not enough to be part of the Jewish Council, not enough to complain about what we do not like:

We develop a life-long relationship with GOD, an identity as integral to whom we are, as: being BORN.

The other day, I was speaking with several people who wanted to claim this as their CHURCH, but their problem was they did not want to give up being Catholic, or being Methodist, or being Jewish, to be Presbyterian. I am a 2nd generation Presbyterian Pastor, who for my Grandfather, my Mother, my Father and I, all were REQUIRED to choose whether we wanted to be Presbyterian; HOWEVER I want to tell you that this church has always been an ecumenical Church, AND that you are part of THIS BODY OF CHRIST. The name of the Church and the Governmental structure are Presbyterian, yet, from the beginning we have been Disciples, Congregationalists, Methodists, NonDenominationalists, Pentecostals, Baptists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Catholics and Presbyterians.

There is more of a connection between our Old and New Testament passages this morning than that according to John, Jesus made reference to this story about snakes.

Who among us this morning have a Medical background? Chaplains, Medics, Pharmacists, Nurses, Practitioners, Doctors, Psychiatrists... this morning is the story behind the MEDICAL SYMBOLS: CADUCEUS and AESCULAPIUS and the Picture on our Bulletin.

First we need to remember that Jesus according to all 4 of the Gospels was in a Greco-Roman World, ruled by the Caesars and the Roman Senate, who had conquered this territory from the Ancient Greeks, who had taken it from the Jewish people of Israel.

That is important because culturally, the readers knew those cultures, their stories and beliefs.

Similar to the story of Nicodemus... According to Moses: The TORAH, Pentateuch, ANCIENT JEWISH LAW... after the Passover Crossing the Red Sea into the Wilderness with Moses, People COMPLAINED.

Why do we have to eat Manna? Why is there not water to drink? Maybe we had life better before Moses? SO GOD gave them something to really complain about: SNAKES. Not only that they saw Snakes, like the Egyptians being surrounded with FROGS, HAIL, LIGHTNING, the River changed to Blood; these Snakes bit people and they died. The people recognized they were wrong, and sent MOSES to GOD to beg forgiveness. And GOD instructed Moses to put a snake on a pole which was lifted-up for people to look upon and seeing this symbol of: death, their fears and complaining; they would instead LIVE!

According to the Ancient Greeks, AESCULAPIUS was “the God of Medicine and Healing” who carried a Tree Branch as his Staff entwined with a Snake, representing all the Medicines derived from plants & venoms. AESCULAPIUS was killed by his grandfather Zeus with a Thunderbolt, for healing too many people instead of their being condemned to Death. The God Hermes (often called Mercury) took up AESCULAPIUS’ staff naming it the CADUCEUS. Because Mercury is described as “The Winged God” the Caduceus grew a pair of wings, and for balance one snake became two. Hippocrates, the Father of Western Medicine, was believed to have been a direct descendant of the God Aesculapius, and we remember the Hippocratic Oath of Medicine, which begins: “I SWEAR BY APOLLO AND BY AESCULAPIUS...”

All of which might be lost to us, except for an Assistant Surgeon in the US ARMY MEDICAL CORP named Capt. Frederick Reynolds, who after our Civil War and prior to the 1st WW in 1902 recommended to the Surgeon General, that the United States should wear pins of the CADUCEUS on their lapels like the Medical Corps of Foreign Nations, except he chose the wrong symbol! The MEDICAL ASSOCIATIONS of ASIA, INDIA, BRITAIN, FRANCE, GERMANY, AFRICA & SCANDANAVIA all wear the single SNAKE SYMBOL of AESCULAPIUS, not the two snakes with wings of CADUCEUS.

The Picture at the top of our Bulletin comes from my travels in South Sudan, establishing a Health Care System there. The problem in South Sudan still today is a Polygamous Dowry Culture, meaning that men sometimes have 3 and 4 wives, and the dowry paid for each Wife is 150 Cows, which represents a lot of Cow Manure. Experience in South Sudan was great training for my coming to Green Valley (not because of the Multiple Wives or Cows) because for 8 months each year temperatures soar above 120, and just as here there are 4 months of Rainy Season, except theirs generates 18” or more of rain per day, flooding the desert to 3-4 feet of standing water and liquifying all of that manure.

Now there is an ancient PARASITE in these conditions in South Sudan, just as there was in the 40 year Desert wanderings of MOSES and the HEBREW people, called the GUINEA WORM. Take a look at the palm of your hand, because of these excessive conditions the skin of the Life-Line and Heart-Line of this woman’s hands cracked open. This allows the Guinea Worm a Microscopic Parasite to enter her blood stream, where it grows to a size which can block veins and arteries. The only means of cure, is to insert a needle or toothpick through the skin into the worm, and slowly gradually over a lengthy period twist, until the worm wraps itself like the Serpent on the Pole.

In the GOSPEL OF JOHN, the symbol of JESUS ON THE CROSS, instead of 1 or 2 SNAKES, becomes the sign of HEALING & RESURRECTED LIFE. What has this to do with Patio Sale? We pray you will lift with your legs, hydrate, and throughout the week remember we are the CHURCH who trust and work for reconciliation.