

Reverend Amy Gearhart Sage  
Manchester United Methodist Church  
February 24, 2002  
8:00 a.m.  
“Spirit Transplants”

Just want to report to you all, in case you've been wondering, that yes, Carl is coming back. He decided to come back after his Sabbath renewal time. He'll be back in the office this coming week. Some of you have reported “Carl sightings” out in the community, so we know that he is alive and well and that he is looking forward to being back in ministry with us this week. I know you'll join me in welcoming him back, when you have an opportunity to see him.

A change this morning, in the bulletin, is that the sermon title that you see printed in there is not the sermon that I'm going to be preaching. While I can assure you that would have been a really great sermon (“Every Day Sacred”), a lot happens between Monday's planning of the bulletin and Sunday morning. God has planted on my heart a different thing to be talking about this morning. I'm going to be talking about, and we're going to be thinking about, transplants and God's desire for each one of us to receive a transplant this Lent. Let us pray.

Holy God, for the gift of this day, for the sunshine that warms up and wakes up our souls and spirits, for the gift of this place where we can come to grow in fellowship with one another and with You, we give You thanks. And we ask Your blessings upon us, O Lord, that as we sing Your Word, and hear Your Word, and read Your Word and proclaim Your Word, that somehow in the midst of this morning, that Word might newly reshape us and recreate us so that we might become more faithful disciples of Yours. In Jesus Christ, Amen.

Well, it's the second Sunday of Lent and you remember from last week how we talked about Lent being that journey, that forty-day journey that takes us from this time all the way to the Easter miracle, to the Easter celebration at the end of March. Lent is a holy time when we spend some time slowing down enough so that God can reconnect with us. It's a holy time when we live out some new disciplines of prayer and service and fasting. Times of allowing ourselves to be open for God to do new work in our lives. Lent is a very special time. A time that, if we take it seriously and take it faithfully, we find ourselves better prepared for the gift of love that will be given to us on Easter morning, in the resurrection of Christ.

On the second Sunday of Lent, we are also in John's Gospel, as Dean read for us, introduced again to that wonderful character, Nicodemus. And while Nicodemus has very many things about him that are very different and unique from our stories, there is much about Nicodemus that is very much like us.

Nicodemus (John tells us) is a Pharisee. A Pharisee who is one of the upper echelon rulers and leaders of the Jewish community. Chances are, Nicodemus cut his teeth on the Hebrew faith and traditions. His first words were probably words that he learned out of the Old Testament. Nicodemus is someone whom we would call today deeply religious. Someone who knows the words, someone who knows how to live out the life, someone who knows the traditions of the church and faithfully abides by that lifestyle every day of his life. That's probably what makes Nicodemus a little different from us.

But the story that we hear in John's Gospel this morning is where we begin to understand that he is very similar to us. John tells us how Nicodemus steals away in the night, maybe for fear of being seen by those whom he respects and those who have been raised in the faith. And he steals away in the night to go and find Jesus, the one who he has heard has been performing signs and miracles. Somewhere in his heart, he knows that this Jesus is for real, but he wants to go and find out for himself. So, he goes in the night and there he meets Jesus. This is where we encounter the part of Nicodemus that is probably very much like us. Nicodemus goes to Jesus in the middle of the night and asks him questions. He wants to know

more about these signs that Jesus has been doing around the people and around the villages that Nicodemus is hearing about. He wants to know what he has to do to understand with more clarity what these signs are about. He wants to know the step by steps of how to understand the mysterious mind of God.

What makes Nicodemus a lot like us, I believe, is that he, along with us so many times, wants to know what it takes, what do we need to do to accomplish a relationship with God? It's in the face of his inquiry that Jesus offers exactly what needs to be done. He says to Nicodemus, "No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of Water and the Spirit. No one can be born of the Kingdom of God without being born from above." Jesus is teaching Nicodemus that a faith journey does not start first with us and our decisions and our abilities and our accomplishments. A faith relationship first starts with God and God's desire to transform in us, renew in us a new Spirit, a new relationship that helps us enter into a new life's journey with our Lord.

One of the wonderful stories from these 2002 Winter Olympics is the story of Chris Klug. Maybe you've read a little about Chris. Chris was the US snowboarding champion in all the championships this past year. While Chris never stood on that gold medal platform in these Winter Olympics, he did earn the bronze in the giant slalom snowboarding competition. But, what makes Chris unique, I believe, is where he found himself nineteen months ago. You see, eight years ago, Chris was diagnosed with a rare liver condition that only one in ten thousand people have. And he found out, that while he thought that he could go for years and years into his adult life without a liver transplant, he found out instead that he would have to immediately have a transplant. That transplant would take place during the height of his preparation and training for the Olympic Games.

Just nineteen months ago, Chris Klug found himself in the recovery room of an operation room where he had received a lifesaving transplant. He tells the story of how he would have never been allowed to compete, how he never would have been physically able to do what he needed to do to compete in the Olympics, without this lifesaving gift, a gift that over seventy-nine-thousand people long for every year in longing for organ transplants and only twenty-three-thousand receive.

Chris Klug's father said that nineteen months ago when he received that new liver, which happened to have been from a donor from the St. Louis metropolitan area, nineteen months ago when he received that gift of a new liver, he received the gift of new life. In his own words, Chris Klug said, "I, because I have had this transplant, have been able to experience the most fun day of my life!"

Now, let's shift back twenty centuries to that nighttime conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. What Jesus was telling Nicodemus was that he didn't need a liver transplant, but that he needed a Spirit transplant. That so much of his soul and so much of his spirit had become deadened, had become atrophied to the laws and rituals of the church, without remembering that it is God's work and God's desire to renew in each one of us a new spirit, to give each one of us a gift of new life, to journey with each one of us on a journey of transformation.

Well, the Good News is that Nicodemus must have experienced that Spirit transplant that night, for we only hear about Nicodemus two other times in all of the Bible, and those two other times are mentioned in John's Gospel. What must have happened in the presence of the living Lord that night, and what must have been given to Nicodemus as a free gift was that Spirit transplant that he needed and longed for in a relationship with Christ. As a result of that gift, his life too was transformed and turned around.

The second time we hear about Nicodemus (in John's Gospel) is not in the quiet and safety of the night, but as he boldly stands before the council of Jewish leaders and says to them, "Do not arrest Jesus, for this man has done nothing wrong." You see, when one receives the Spirit transplant, they find themselves doing things they never thought they'd do before. They find themselves offering themselves and serving in love in ways they never thought they would before. They find themselves in places that

they never dreamed they would be before. Nicodemus moved from someone who stole away in the night to see Jesus to someone who had received a Spirit transplant . . . a Spirit of renewal . . . a Spirit of transformation. . . a Spirit of boldness in his discipleship, as he defended Jesus before his friends.

The third time, and the last time that we hear Nicodemus' name, is in an equally risky and difficult story in Jesus' life. It's the story of when Nicodemus must have carried in a large basket all the oils and aloes that were needed for him to travel to the tomb of Jesus and to prepare the crucified body of his friend for burial.

When we receive the gift of a Spirit transplant, we find ourselves doing new things, we find ourselves in new places, we find ourselves being new people, as disciples of Jesus Christ.

One of the privileges I have, as one of the pastors of this Church, is to journey with you as you give witness to, and share the story of, what happens in our lives and your lives when that Spirit transplant takes hold of us. I get to hear the stories of how God's transforming grace, that gift of love that God can transplant into us, can change our lives and take us to new places and carry us to do new things.

Two women in our church, Jo and Donna, found themselves just weeks ago, on a Volunteers in Mission trip to Haiti. Not Hayti, Missouri. . . Haiti – the country. . . far, far away, ministering to the world's poorest of poor people, through their hands of servanthood and stewardship, offering to them the gift of God's love in Jesus Christ.

Last Saturday, it was reported that seventy-nine people gathered, Sharon was one of them who gathered all day long, to rehabilitate and recreate eighty-one bicycles. To repair and replace the spokes and the wheels and the seats and the handlebars so that they could be delivered to children and families in the Inner City, to be shared through the Kingdom House Ministries.

Last evening, in Saturday night worship, we had the privilege of having with us, in worship, eighteen of our finest youth in our Church and their leaders. Eighteen youth and adults who had made a decision, after receiving that gift of that Spirit transplant, to fast for thirty hours. They participated in what we call our thirty-hour famine, a time of fasting, where they spend time in prayer and in service at Metro Ministry and they spend time in fellowship with one another. Over the course of those thirty hours, as they fasted and abstained from eating food, they raised over fifteen hundred dollars for food ministries in our city and our county.

When we receive a Spirit transplant, we find ourselves doing things we never thought we'd do. We find ourselves in places we never thought we would go. Nicodemus knew that journey. Lent is the time. . . Lent is the season when God invites us on that journey. May we open our lives, open our hearts to the possibilities of what God can do through us as God offers us that gift of a Spirit transplant this Lent. Amen