

“Living Well: Intellectually” **a Lenten Journey**

Lent Week 2: March 3, 2020

Gospel: John 3:1-17

By Pr Trey Daum

Preaching the text (ideas, illustrations, connections with Living Well)

Since there is more than enough high-quality commentary on this text generally, I'll mostly focus here on how the text intersects with the theme of Living Well: Intellectually.

It seems that the Christian witness has something of a love/hate relationship with the intellect. Perhaps less-so in the ELCA and like-*minded* (pun-intended) traditions, but in other Christian communities and certainly in the mind of many in worship, there is tension between the head and the heart. There are many stories and teachings in scripture where it can be easily (perhaps sometimes rightly) conveyed that knowledge, knowing, and learning are painted in direct contrast to faith and faithfulness. The Gospel lesson today includes such tension between a well-educated leader (Nicodemus), and an up-and-coming charismatic rabble-rouser (Jesus) who questions the value of Nicodemus' knowledge and provides words that are not particularly interesting sound. Many who are listening to today's story are also asking the question that Nicodemus asks: "How can these things be?" It may be worthwhile to explore in a sermon or throughout worship how human intellect can serve faith, and how it can hinder it or at least complicate it.

Sacramental Connections

It can be easy for me to assume that those in worship this week understand the way this story connects with baptism, or that they understand what is going on in a baptismal service, or that they have been baptized. I often have to keep those assumptions on check. In an effort to connect the theme of living well intellectually and the baptismal content of the text, you might engage in a teaching sermon on the sacrament of Holy Baptism. It is likely that at least some of the people in worship this week have had little to no baptismal education and they may be delighted with some entry-level engagement with the basic stuff of Baptism.

I've also been guilty of leading a baptismal class for parents/sponsors that has been more about when to show up and where to stand. Consider engaging in some intellectual wellness this Sunday and do "Baptism Class 201" as the sermon. It is also a great opportunity to explicitly invite those who are listening who have not been baptized to learn more, visit with you, come forward for prayer, etc. Search online for "Why We

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Need an Altar Call to the Font” by Benjamin M. Stewart for some reflections on publicly inviting people to baptism.

I once moved the baptismal font to a more central spot prior to worship one Sunday morning. I took the lid off, filled it with water, and went back to my office to prepare a few more things. Upon returning to the sanctuary, I noticed a congregation member had placed “Reserved” signs on a few front pews to provide a hospitable place for a baptismal party to sit. To his surprise, there was no baptismal party. Rather the filled font was a call for all who were baptized to return to the waters of baptism and to the promise therein.

If the baptismal font in your worship space is covered-up, dried-out, and set aside most weeks (or only brought out when there is a planned baptism) consider having splashing around in it this Sunday. The sight and sounds of the baptismal font may be enough to help those in worship remember and rejoice in their own baptism and hear more clearly the Good News proclaimed in today's Gospel, your sermon, and throughout worship.

Children’s Sermon

If you’re engaging with the waters of baptism in the sermon or other parts of worship, invite children to come around the font, or scoop out some water in a bowl to let the children remember their baptism (be sure to also graciously consider that some of them may not be baptized).

If you’re not primarily focusing on baptism today and want to instead talk with children about Living Well: Intellectually, you could use the theme of the day as an opportunity to highlight and give thanks to God for (some of) their vocation as students. I catch myself having to remember that the gifts of learning and intellect that God gives them is not for them to become better acolytes or council members, but so that they can serve God at bank offices, behind computer screens, on building sites, at home, at school, or wherever their day-to-day lives will find them.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, as Nicodemus was challenged to think differently about life in your kingdom, speak to us in ways that challenge us so we may think differently and trust not in our understanding but in your word through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen

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Synod Challenge (\$ for Wells in CAR)

If you have members in your congregation who have been involved with our partnership with the church in CAR, invite them to share what they know, experienced, or understand about that relationship with others in your congregation during a time of intellectual wellness in an adult education hour, or other appropriate occasion.

Hymn of the Day

Take My Life That I May Be (ELW #583 or ELW #685)