
A Life Lived Tenderly with Ecstasy and Love

A sermon preached by the Reverend Stephanie Nagley at the Requiem Eucharist for Luann Colburn Vaky on March 12, 2016 at St. Luke's, Bethesda

John 3:1-8

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The gospel reading from John about Nicodemus and the nature of God's spirit was one that Luann was particularly drawn to. Why that gospel? I didn't have a chance to ask Luann that questions so I can only speculate. I think in that gospel Luann saw both the very nature of God and how it is we are to be caught up in that nature.

Nicodemus goes to Jesus in the dark. It is easy to think he did that in order to avoid being seen by others. As a leader of the Jews he was going into the enemy camp, so to speak. Jesus was shaking up the establishment by drawing their attention to the ways they had yet to fulfill the claim God had on their lives.

That being said, there's another interpretation that is more compelling than Nicodemus hiding in the dark. Nicodemus is actually following the teaching that it is best to study Torah at night. The night is quieter and our attention less scattered by the demands that come with daylight so we can really hear and see that God is showing us the way to a full and complete life.

Nicodemus goes to Jesus, in the dark, Jesus who is living the Torah. Nicodemus is going to a rabbi to learn God's way for his life.

Like many of us Nicodemus wants more. He is a recognized religious leader but there's something missing. He knows the law but it's not enough. He preaches the law but it's not enough. He tries to practice the law but it's not enough. He sees Jesus as someone who is walking the way and living the law expressing the presence of God in flesh and bone.

I think Luann was drawn to that passage because she knew God's call on her life. She knew that we were, in our own and particular ways, seeking to understand what it is we are to do with this one precious life of ours and how we best live in this world. She knew the triumphs and the tragedies of the human condition. As the spouse of a diplomat she knew the gold leaf palaces of Central and Latin America and she knew the poverty in the streets. She knew that in those triumphs and tragedies life is taking us on a journey and on that journey we have endless openings to a life centered on God's spirit.

One of the things I admired about Luann was her spirit. She had that rare combination of gentleness, civility and truth-telling. She had the ability to disagree but never be disagreeable. There were times that Luann thought I needed to rethink my position or get another perspective. She always did that, told her truth, and did it in such a way that I felt loved, cared for and supported. She was the kind of companion on the journey that could be trusted because she told the truth and loved at the same time.

I think she was able to do that because she understood what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus; to fulfill the high calling of God on your life you have to be all in. The born again Spirit isn't about finding God in your life, but locating your life in God's life. And so she could dare to speak the truth and love at the same time. She could disagree without being disagreeable. She could hold her position and still hold you as one of her beloved.

When Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be born from above, Nicodemus said he didn't know how to do that. He didn't know how to be born all over again.

Jesus reassured him that he didn't have to figure it. He just had to fall into the truth, the truth that was sitting right next him that night.

In the dark, Nicodemus was sitting right next to the love of God that had spilled into the world for everyone. Nicodemus was sitting next to all that he longed for and for the very thing he had searched high and low to find.

Luann got that. She knew that the passionate love of God had spilled out into the world and she was a part of it.

In the dark days of 1941, a prisoner of the Germans, a Frenchman and devout Christian named Olivier Messiaen, composed the most beautiful music. He composed that music according to a verse in the French translation of the Book of Revelation, where the angel announces "There is no more time". The Book of Revelation is the book that tells us the end time of a world that seems endlessly broken and tortured that finally and at last enters into the eternal and loving and healing life of God.



He called his composition "Quartet for the End of Time." The rhythms are irregular and constantly changing. Musicians who play this piece have to be on their toes, aware of each other and listen. In this composition they have to play in communion with each other. His composition is unlike anything else, this quartet about the end of time as we know it and the entrance of God's time that we are asked to enter. On the score where most composers give instructions such as, "Play slowly, play moderately, play rapidly," Messiaen wrote, "Play tenderly, play with ecstasy, play with love."

To be born from above is to play this life tenderly, with ecstasy and with love. That's how God plays with us and that's what it is to play our lives in the life of God. Luann understood that. She gave her life to being in the life

of God, as best she could, for as long as she could. She played with tenderness and ecstasy and love.

And now she's with God fully. I say that, not because I know what happens after this life, but because I am convinced that life with God does follow. For as hard as we fiercely hang on to this earthly life there comes a time of so something so astonishing we are willing to give the last breath to the One who gave us the first. Because we so fiercely hang on to what we know I am convinced what we sense what comes is something so astonishing we are willing to let go.

Luann now knows what we continue to wonder. Luann now knows the depth and breadth of the One to whom she continued to give her life to for these past 85 years.

Peter, Paul and Matthew, she loved you fiercely. And she loved you loved. You could see it in her face when she talked about you. She loved her family fiercely. The days ahead will be painful reminders of her loss. But they will also be days of joy as you remember her and the way she was with you.

Remember and tell the stories you have of her. The big things and the small things that linger and remind you of her. For you and all of us here, the call on our lives is to honor her by giving ourselves to love as she did. To honor her is to remember that through Luann God has placed a call on our lives to live in the life of God, to be the presence of God for others as she was for us. To honor her is to play our lives with tenderness, ecstasy and love.