

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa  
Sunday, May 21, 2023 – Easter 6**

**Readings: Isaiah 65:17-25  
John 3:1-8**

**Sermon: The Tipping Point**

A few weeks ago, my daughters and I attended a play at Great Canadian Theatre Company. It was a play written and acted in by my nibling Jax, as well as 10 other young people, most between the ages of 17-20. This is a drama group that started working together in 2018-2019, and they went through the process of researching, writing and improvising it into a script and turning it into this amazing theatre project.

The inspiration for their play was the climate crisis, involving the stories of young environmentalists, like Greta Thunberg, and it was called 12. The title 12 came from the fact that at the time when they started working on it, there were 12 years until the tipping point. They also told us, that everything in the story is true. Based on scientific facts that point us to the reality that we are growing ever closer to that tipping point, from which we cannot turn back.

A tipping point, in case you're wondering, is the moment when a small change triggers a much larger, often irreversible, response. Applied to the climate crisis, it means that point in time when the world gets to a certain point in the process of warming the earth, with an increase of only 1.5 degrees Celsius, when we will not be able to prevent the inevitable destruction of the earth's life, diversity, or community welfare.

Not very far into the play, they interrupted the flow, to update us – because the play was put on hold during the pandemic, it's now 8. 8 years to the tipping point of no return.

Anyways their play got me thinking about tipping points. We can apply the image of the tipping point to so many aspects of our life, not just the environment: at what point does a family decide to let their child follow their own path, even though they may not completely understand? At what point does a friendship become something different, like romantic love? at what point does drinking become alcoholism?

At what point does the life of a congregation or any volunteer organization become impossible to sustain? What is the tipping point where there is not enough life or hope to keep going?

In our scripture story today, we find ourselves eavesdropping on a conversation between Jesus, and a Pharisee called Nicodemus. It's a relatively famous passage of scripture, because if you read further in the story, Jesus says the immortal words: Yes, God so loved the world, that God gave the only begotten One, that whoever believes may not die, but have eternal life (3:16 Inclusive Language Bible.)

Nicodemus is one of my favourite characters in the gospels, because I identify with him. The Pharisees you see were the teachers, the local caretakers of the faith – that’s kind of the role people in ministry play today. There’s always this tension between mission, by which I mean doing something completely new, and then maintenance, which is making sure the foundations don’t crumble underneath the mission.

You can see in the story that Nicodemus is caught in a similar situation. He has been faithful to the traditions of his ancestors and family, but at the same time he is intrigued, he is curious, about what Jesus might have to offer. Jesus was from that same tradition of faith, of course, but Nicodemus was finding Jesus to be different, refreshing, maybe even revolutionary compared to the institutions that Nicodemus has spent his lifetime serving.

So Nicodemus and Jesus have this conversation, beginning with Nicodemus respecting and complimenting Jesus, but still not quite buying what Jesus says about our relationship with God being born from above?.

Jesus, for his part, seemed to realize that Nicodemus was having trouble disentangling himself from what he has always believed to be the only way to God.

Instead of relying on the teachings of the law and the prophets, Jesus introduced another source for understanding God – this is the work of the Spirit, ruach from the Hebrew creation story, or pneuma, like breath, in Greek – The Spirit is as impossible to pin down as the wind, yet is as powerful as a new birth.

Nicodemus scoffed, thinking Jesus must be crazy: how can anyone be born again? Physically impossible!

But Jesus was talking about the work of the Spirit, and it is on a completely different level than Nicodemus’ response. For Jesus, once you recognize or welcome the power of the Spirit in your life, you reach that tipping point – that moment which is life-changing. The deeper relationship with God afterwards is the cascade effect of blessing and goodness that follows.

Meanwhile Nicodemus was cautiously tip-toeing around the edges, not fully committed to this person full of the holy Spirit, wondering how it might change his life, not really able to see the benefit, only the cost.

Nicodemus is me, and most 21<sup>st</sup> century people of faith as well I think. We know just enough to be aware of the possibility, but maybe not enough to take a leap.

It’s like the climate crisis, to return to Jax’s play and the concerns that are being raised by young people all around the world. Concerns about what kind of world they will inherit. Concerns about political inaction on some significant sources of global warming. Concerns about how slow it takes to change anything, and when change does take

place (even incrementally), it is too often followed by another election and a new government that needs convincing all over again.

Climate scientists, however, don't only talk about a tipping point that leads to destruction and crisis.

They also talk about another tipping point, one which leads to climate cooling, or at least slowing the pace of global warming. They talk about the tipping point when people work together to reduce burning fossil fuels and to decarbonate our environment.

In Norway electric vehicles are used by 50% of the population, 10 times more than any other country, because they made it possible to buy an electric vehicle at the same cost as one that runs on fuel. So one of the tipping points we could aspire to is to get to the point when an electric vehicle costs the same as conventional cars and trucks in Canada.

The beauty of the tipping point is that it only takes a relatively small number of initial actions to lead to much larger impacts on the global scale. It only takes cooperation between the nations instead of competition. It only takes a bit of sacrifice on our parts to ensure that there is a recovering climate and a recovering economy for our grandchildren to inherit. These small steps brought about by working together create a cascade of benefits that are just as irreversible as the tipping points that lead to destruction. But we have to be ready to commit ourselves to the prioritization of climate justice so that we can preserve this place we call home.

Jesus was ready. Jesus was all in. His vision was such that he led and inspired others to a spiritual rebirth by water and the spirit. He WAS the tipping point, the cascade of blessing and equity and hope, spiritually speaking, for the people who chose to follow him.

Nicodemus - well, don't be so eager to discount Nicodemus either, my friends. Because Nicodemus turned up again in Jesus' story – still a cautious, curious presence on the fringe of Jesus' circle. But faithful in his own way.

In the seventh chapter, Nicodemus turned up again, when Jesus was being attacked and criticized by the religious authorities. To be fair, Jesus did go to the temple, which was their turf, and he did criticize them for distorting God's word and purpose for the people. So its not surprising that they sent the temple police after Jesus, but even the police were so inspired by his teaching that they were unsuccessful in stopping the crowds from following him. The conspiracy to take Jesus down continued amongst the authorities, and that is where Nicodemus appeared again, defending Jesus to his own friends and colleagues, saying: "Maybe you should listen to what he has to say! Maybe there is some truth in what he is telling us."

The final place where we see Nicodemus in Jesus' story is at the end, chapter 19, where Jesus has died on the cross and a secret disciple named Joseph of Arimathea

steps forward to ask for Jesus' body so that he can bury Jesus in his own tomb. In John's gospel, our friend Nicodemus is Joseph's helper, Nicodemus is the one who provided the spices that were used to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Again, he was just tiptoeing around the edges of full public commitment. But still he represented one of those small steps that just might lead to the cascading blessing that was new life on Easter morning.

Like the disciples who went public, and were not following in secret, Nicodemus reminds us that faith journeys are ambiguous pathways, pathways that keep us seeking, that keep us hoping, that may cause us to step backwards at times, but are always an open invitation by the Spirit to deepen our commitment and our courage. To live in faith in creation, one small step at a time, leads us to a that tipping point where God's infinite love and grace will reign in all creation. Thanks be to God, Amen.