

A sermon preached on March 8th, 2020 based upon John 3:1-17.

For many of us the Gospel story we are about to hear is a familiar one, containing a couple of the most well-known verses in the Bible. For all of its familiarity, however this passage can be a hard one to make sense of, and so we're going to take it in small pieces. As I talked about a couple of weeks back, John's Gospel is distinctly different from the other three Gospels. John tells us right up front in chapter one that Jesus is God incarnate. In chapter two, Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding banquet, a powerful sign of God's abundant grace and desire to give us joy. After this sign Jesus drives out the money changers in the Temple incurring the wrath of the religious establishment, an event that doesn't occur until the final week of Jesus' life in the other three Gospels. Listen, now for the Word of the Lord.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

The Pharisees as a group historically have gotten a bad rap. We think of them as the "bad guys" who repeatedly came in conflict with Jesus. Although they acted out of a mistaken premise, they really were people trying to live a good life. In following the Law they would have regularly given alms to the poor and shown hospitality to foreigners. Nicodemus was a leader among his people, and we can assume he has lived a life worthy of respect.

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."

There is a sincere pursuit of truth expressed in the visit Nicodemus paid to Jesus that is remarkable – especially in light of the human tendency so apparent in our present political life to divide into competing tribes and to refuse to consider any truth claims that come from outside one's own tribe. Collectively, the Pharisees perceived Jesus as a threat: to their understanding of truth and to their place in the status quo. So there would have been immense pressure within the tribe to conform to the standard critique of Jesus.

But Nicodemus recognizes that there is something undeniably real and authentic about Jesus – that there is a power at work in his life for good that can only be attributed to God's presence.

Nicodemus comes by cover of night to visit Jesus. You can see this as fear or you can see this as prudence or both. If people were to see him visiting Jesus in order to converse there would have been a severe backlash from his fellow Pharisees. In spite of his caution, Nicodemus strikes me as admirable. He has the humility and the integrity to seek truth wherever it is to be found.

Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

The Greek words translated in this instance "born from above" can also be translated "born again." It has both meanings, and this fact creates confusion for Nicodemus, and can also do so for us since the English translation doesn't make this clear.

Nicodemus takes Jesus to be saying "born again", an expression that suggests a definitive moment of conversion in a person's life. You might be surprised to know that the term "born again Christian" dates back only to the 1960s, and it arises from a failure to grasp that Jesus had the "born from above" meaning in mind.

Some Christians are graced with a particular powerful experience that they identify as the moment they were "born again." This is a beautiful thing. But sometimes the term "born again Christian" carries with it the implication that without such an experience you aren't a "real" Christian. Many of us can't identify a particular "born again" moment in our spiritual journey, but that doesn't make us any less of a Christian. It is important to note that the concept of a "born again Christian" arises out of a failure to grasp that Jesus actually spoke of being "born from above" – an expression more suggestive of an ongoing process rather than a once and done experience.

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?"

When we talk about spiritual reality, we are confronted with this basic problem: Words taken from the physical realm are ultimately inadequate for speaking directly of spiritual realities, and so we have no choice but to turn to metaphors. Oftentimes, however people take the metaphors literally and the deeper meanings to which the metaphors are intended to point get lost, which is what we see Nicodemus do here, and something that happens repeatedly in John's Gospel

Nicodemus' response also reveals that he is locked into a mindset that views religion or the spiritual life as something we do. There are rules to follow, techniques to put into practice in an attempt to be faithful to God. And there is truth to this -- the spiritual life does involve things we do: We try to care for our neighbor. We try to set aside time to pray. We take responsibility for what is under our control.

But there is a crucial dimension of the spiritual life that involves precisely the opposite: Letting go of control. It means as Connie used to tell Bob, "letting God drive the bus." Letting go and letting God.

Most of us don't like giving up control. We like to think of ourselves as being adults who are in charge of our lives.

The metaphor of birth is a challenge to Nicodemus precisely because getting born is something we can't do for ourselves. Somebody has to give birth to us.

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The 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 wind is such a great metaphor for the movement of the Spirit. Like the Spirit, the wind is invisible – you can't see it. And like the Spirit, you can't control the wind. Interestingly, the same word in Greek means both wind and Spirit. When and where the wind or the Spirit begins to blow isn't something we get to decide.

And so this new birth that is required to begin to experience the reality of the Kingdom of God is not something we control.

But we can pay attention for when the Spirit begins to move in our lives and rather than resist it, give ourselves over to it.

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

If you're finding this conversation confusing, take some comfort in knowing that Nicodemus – a really smart guy who knew a great deal about religion -- is utterly baffled by what Jesus is talking about. Although our brains have a place to play in the life of faith, the belief that you can somehow think your way into the Kingdom of God sets up a road block to God's Spirit moving in our lives.

The reality of the Kingdom of God – the truth that Christianity points to – becomes apparent to us as the result of experiences of grace that fundamentally alter how we perceive life.

But here is something else to take comfort in: on the spiritual journey, there is something to be said for finding ourselves in the state of utter confusion because confusion is something God can work with. Jesus was expressing this idea when he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." God has a harder time working with people who can't acknowledge their poverty of spirit – people who are convinced they have God all figured out. That's what fundamentalists peddle – not faith but a fake sense of absolute certainty.

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about

heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

There's a lot here and I won't spend a lot of time on it other than to point out that we often talk of heaven as being up there in the sky, which is really just a metaphorical way of expressing the truth that heaven is beyond our grasp. In John's Gospel, Jesus is the one who has "descended" from heaven, and who will ascend back to God, with the first stage of the ascension taking place when he is lifted up on the cross. Like the ancient Hebrews wandering in the wilderness found healing by gazing upon the symbol of a snake lifted up on a pole by Moses, so we find the clearest expression of God self-giving love expressed in the image of Jesus pouring out his life for us on the cross.

There are no quotation marks in ancient Greek, so it is hard to tell where Jesus stops talking and John the Gospel writer begins to comment. But it seems clear that the next verse – one of the most famous of verses in the Bible – is John talking:

For God so loved the world..

Let's stop there just to take this in before proceeding. God's nature is love, and God's whole reason for sending Jesus was pure love. Throughout John's Gospel, "the world" that it is declared here that God loves is described as distinctly hostile to God. So take that in: God loves – God cherishes -- a world that is in active rebellion against God. This is the reality out of which elsewhere Jesus teaches us to "Love our enemies."

And yet in what follows, people have often twisted this famous verse in a way that makes God out to be distinctly non-loving:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

The word "believes" here is misleading. It can sound like faith is about believing certain doctrines: for instance, "Jesus died for my sins." Believe this and you win the prize of receiving eternal life when you die. Don't believe it, and God will punish you by withholding eternal life.

Evangelism becomes fear based, rather than love based. "Hey you better believe what I'm telling you because if you don't God's going to burn you up in the fires of hell."

And then we've totally lost track of the God of love.

To "believe in Jesus" is better understood as "putting our trust" in the God Jesus reveals -- a God who is utterly and totally in love with us. Eternal life

isn't something we experience only when we die – in John's Gospel it's a quality of life that can be experienced now as we live in communion with God's Spirit.

And just in case we missed the point, our passage ends with the following:

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

You get the impression that Nicodemus walked away from that conversation absolutely baffled. But as I said before, in the spiritual life such a state can be more fruitful than thinking you know exactly what's what.

Nicodemus went away with more confusion than when he arrived, but a process has been initiated of being born from above – a process in which Nicodemus slowly but surely begins to get his bearings in life from the unseen reality of God's love and the movement of God's Spirit.

Nicodemus shows up two more times in John's Gospel, both instances stepping a little further out of the darkness to live with more courage and love. The first time is midway through the Gospel when he stands up for Jesus when the Temple authorities are debating about what to do about Jesus.

The second time is after Jesus dies on the cross. Nicodemus steps forward to help take Jesus' body down from the cross in order to give him a proper burial.

Nicodemus is in the process of learning how to trust that God's intention is to make us whole and to use us to help bring healing to a broken world.

The language of "born again" is misleading because it makes it sound like it's a one and done deal: once we take Jesus as our savior, the journey is over, and we permanently let Jesus drive the bus.

But that's not how it goes. We are constantly giving into our fears and insisting that we are the ones who will drive the bus.

And if you are like me, even though we say we that unlike the Pharisees we believe we are saved by grace and not by works of the law, our default position tends to be one in which we try to prove we are worthy of God's love. We fall back into doing good deeds in a misguided attempt to earn God's love for us.

But God can't love us more than God already does.

The reason we love our neighbor isn't to earn God's love, but rather because when God's love gets inside us, our desire is to express that love in our lives.

So the spiritual life is a process, or perhaps better a "journey" and it is possible to make progress on this journey – to increasingly find our bearings from the realm of the Spirit – to develop an capacity for noticing when the Spirit is moving in our lives and allowing ourselves to be led by it. Over time, we become more willing to trust that we really are in good hands when God is driving the bus.