

2017-03-12_Sermon

Born Anew

John 3:1-17

Nicodemus had everything going for him—wealth, status, and prestige. We're told in John's Gospel (19:39) that Nicodemus was wealthy enough to bring 100 pounds of priceless spices to prepare Jesus' body for burial.

Nicodemus also enjoyed status as a member of the exclusive Pharisee Party. There were only 6000 in the whole land who had sworn to keep every detail of the Law—down to the last jot and tittle.

Nicodemus was accorded prestige among the Jews. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the religious "Supreme Court" of the Jews. Nicodemus possessed the highest credentials. Jesus called him a teacher of Israel. Any rabbi in the country would have considered it a great honor to be Nicodemus' disciple.

By all outward appearances, Nicodemus was a successful man. Moreover, he was a godly man who lived with great integrity by the tenets of his religion. He was living proof that religion and prosperity could live harmoniously together. Nicodemus proved that one could live by God's law and still be a worldly success. Most of us would see him as a model that we would try to emulate.

Yes, Nicodemus had it made, but deep inside him (where people couldn't see) there was a gnawing doubt. It was expressed through a searching question he was afraid to ask out loud.

“Is this all there is to it?”

Meanwhile, Nicodemus continued to operate by a clear philosophy of life—one which you and I readily recognize. It goes something like this.

If one plays by the rules—both written and unwritten—one should have the inside track to success.

Nicodemus was rapidly moving along this track, but now he questioned the track's destination. Would the trip be worth it?

Nicodemus had kept the rules—both written and unwritten. It was his investment in a happy and successful life.

Often he had said with great sincerity and profundity, “If everyone simply kept the Ten Commandments, the world would be a paradise.

Not only had Nicodemus obeyed the written commandments, he also successfully coped with all those unwritten rules designed to separate those who made it from those who didn't. He read the right books, went to the right places, and associated with the right people. He kept up the image of respectability and responsibility.

All of this was becoming a burden to him. A strange restlessness was stirring in his soul.

Perhaps he was going through a mid-life crisis, although Nicodemus wouldn't have used that modern label to identify the reason for his uneasiness. Nicodemus wondered to himself, "Would I do it this way if I could start over again? I wonder what my life would have been like if I had chosen a different path to follow?"

Nicodemus felt as though he had been living a double life. One side of it—the side visible to the world—was the model of rectitude. It was the side people respected and admired when they looked at Nicodemus.

But then there was the other side of his double life. It was the side which came out in the dead of night as he was lying on his bed trying to go to sleep. Nicodemus was aware of this side of his personality, but he could not dialogue with it very well. He didn't know how to address it, but it affected him deeply.

Sometimes he simply couldn't sleep and he would get up and read the scrolls in his library trying to get some assurance. Sometimes Nicodemus would dream troubled dreams filled with scary symbolic images making no sense to his rational mind. After one of those nightmares, Nicodemus would wake up in a cold sweat with his heart beating wildly.

Nicodemus brooded about his mortality. How would he die? Would he have courage to face his death when it comes? The nights were terrible times for Nicodemus when he would have to wrestle with the shadow side of his personality. When the mornings finally came, Nicodemus greeted them with relief because they signaled the time when he could resume being the Nicodemus known by the world.

However, one of those nights was to be different—a night Nicodemus would always remember.

The Rabbi Jesus was in town and Nicodemus couldn't get Him out of his mind. "I have to speak with this man," Nicodemus thought to himself. Yet even as he thought this, Nicodemus was struggling with the dayside of his personality.

"What would people think? What's more important, what would my colleagues think? What would someone without the proper degrees and credentials teach me? Yet God must be with that man, Jesus. Look at the signs He has done!"

On this particular night, Nicodemus was intensely restless. Nicodemus had logged his study time of the Law as he did most nights because there were fewer distractions. However, on this one night, Nicodemus couldn't concentrate on his studies and he couldn't go to sleep. Images of Jesus the Rabbi kept flashing through his mind. Nicodemus had to see Him. Perhaps Jesus had a word or sign which would quiet the restlessness in Nicodemus' soul.

The night would also mean less risk of detection for Nicodemus. Thus he decided to sneak over to the place where Jesus was staying.

What was Jesus' reaction to this VIP visit? It appears from today's Gospel selection that Jesus was not overawed by Nicodemus.

Jesus got to the point very quickly. After Nicodemus' opening compliment that Jesus must be for real because of the miraculous signs He did, Jesus responded not to Nicodemus' compliment, but to Nicodemus' inner need.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3)

This affirmation goes right to the center of Nicodemus' dilemma and he responds out of his pain.

“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? (John 3:4)

There may have been some sarcasm in that question, but it springs from the agony of Nicodemus' inner life. Nicodemus thought to himself, "I would like to live my life over again so that I wouldn't become trapped in this success syndrome having to conform to its expectations. But we all know that we can't wipe out what we've done. We're the sum total of our experiences. What we've done has been done. We have to accept ourselves as we are.

Jesus perceives Nicodemus' pain and imprisonment within a pattern of earthly assumptions. Thus Jesus sympathetically answers Nicodemus by speaking of a heavenly birth involving water and the Spirit. In essence Jesus says to Nicodemus,

"Nicodemus, the kind of being born anew I am talking about breaks out of earthly time and space into a different dimension. It is a birth from heaven. It is given to us through water and the Spirit."

At this point, Jesus is trying to build a bridge into Nicodemus' frame of reference. Being born of water was not a strange phrase to Nicodemus. Converts to Judaism were baptized in water and were said by the rabbis to have been born anew. They had left their old existence in the Gentile world and were initiating a new life in Judaism.

Nicodemus would also have recognized Jesus' reference to being born anew in the Spirit. Nicodemus was familiar with the Genesis (2:7) picture of God breathing into (literally, "in spiriting") man's nostrils the breath of life birthing man as a "living soul."

Jesus was trying to tell Nicodemus that being born anew was not something a person did for himself. It was accomplished by God's Holy Spirit who, like the wind blowing where it wills, causes things to happen.

However, Nicodemus' earth-bound mindset could not comprehend this. "How can these things be?" he asks.

Nicodemus had always been used to living within a structured frame of reference. He expected definite results for definite deeds. If he kept the rules, there were supposed to be successful results for his life. How could Nicodemus comprehend this Spirit who blows where He wills, blessing those whom He chooses? Could Nicodemus have faith in this Spirit whom he could not tame by human effort?

It's at this point that Jesus makes a vital connection between this wild, wind-free Spirit and Himself as the Son of Man. Nicodemus was familiar with the mysterious Son of Man figure who had been revealed by the Prophets Ezekiel and Daniel. Nicodemus recalled Daniel's prophecy that this Son of Man would be presented to the Ancient of Days (who is God) and be given "dominion, glory, and kingdom—which shall not pass away."(Daniel 7:14)

Jesus speaks of Himself when He says to Nicodemus, “No one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”(John 3:13) He challenges Nicodemus not to have faith in rules, but in this person, the Son of Man. It is this very same wind-free Spirit who reveals JESUS as the Son of Man.

How could Nicodemus make this connection?—by looking up! Just as Moses commanded the people to look up at a bronze serpent on a pole and be healed of snake bites in the desert (a passage from Numbers 21:4-9 which was familiar to Nicodemus), so Nicodemus would find faith and healing for his soul by looking up at the One being lifted up or exalted—Jesus Himself. Thus Jesus uses the connection between this ancient story from Numbers and His imminent experience of being lifted up—first on the cross, then from death into His resurrection, and then His ascension into heaven forty days later.

Jesus—the Son of Man—speaking at that moment to Nicodemus—would be lifted up from earth on a cross and then exalted into the heavenly dimension itself through His death, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus invites Nicodemus to be born anew by first witnessing these coming events and then entering into them himself.

Was Nicodemus born anew? There are some tantalizing hints in the Gospel of John that this crucial night's visit started a rebirthing process in Nicodemus' life centered on a deepening relationship with Jesus. It brought a permanent transformation of his life.

We see Nicodemus asserting Jesus' right to a fair hearing when most of the Sanhedrin simply wants Jesus arrested on the charge of being a false prophet. (John 7:50-52) After the Crucifixion, Nicodemus courageously goes with Joseph of Arimathea to claim the body of Jesus.

Thus Nicodemus publically identifies himself with Jesus and risks his own standing and reputation with the Jewish authorities. (John 19:39)

We can assume that Nicodemus at least heard about the Resurrection and remembered his conversation with Jesus containing the prophecy about Jesus being raised up. (John 3:15) When we piece all these references together, we can make a strong case that Nicodemus was changed inwardly by his encounter with Jesus.

What about us? Is there something of Nicodemus in each of us? We know these words of Jesus are true. "You must be born again." Yet we pull back from their implications. It means an inward transformation as well as an outward change which will bring our own double day and night lives into a beautiful harmony.

Yet it is risky. We have to surrender control and let the Spirit blow where He wills. What could it mean for each of us?

We may be blown into some unique experiences we never could have anticipated. We might connect with some very unlikely people. Yet that wind-free Spirit is Jesus Himself—firmly rooted on a cross for us—proving for all time and eternity God’s unceasing love for us. Thus today’s Gospel affirms in John 3:16,

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

When we enter into believing (trusting) Jesus, our day and night personalities are brought into a oneness which can never be torn apart by anything in the world. We are united with Jesus Christ in such a way that eternal life is no longer a future hope, but a present reality. John 17:3 shows Jesus reminding us of that when He taught His disciples, “This is eternal life-- that they know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.”

That my brothers and sisters is the destination of our Christian pilgrimage together—to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent. May we arrive together with Jesus in joy and thanksgiving!