

March 5th, 2023

John 3:1-17 “How Do We Begin Again?”

What does it mean to be “born again?” I ask this because there are so many terms and phrases in the vocabulary of the church that have been misused or re-defined or even co-opted in ways that cause people to run the other way in some cases. These are terms and phrases that have come to mean something entirely different now than they did to the early church. “Born again” is one of them. It’s *so* loaded, but the term comes from this passage in John’s gospel that we have in front of us this morning. Let me tell you a little story that illustrates the baggage that comes along with this term. Some of you have heard this one before, but it’s been a while. Mary and I were living in Pearisburg, Virginia where I was pastor of the First Christian Church there. One day when Graham was seven months old, I took him to the local Food Lion to get groceries. Graham was born in January, so seven months places this story in August. Let me tell you something about summers in Virginia. It is *hot* and humid even in the Appalachian Mountains. Mary was working at the local hospital as a social worker so we would often divide and conquer when it came to errands. It was my turn to get groceries so I had Graham with me, which was fine, because he was my little buddy and I loved going places with him and showing him off. But it was miserably hot outside, and neither one of us did very well in the heat. We’d both get kind of cranky and irritable which was the case on this sticky-hot August day. We walked out of the cool comfort

of that grocery store into a blistering heat that hit us like a wall. You could just feel it coming up from the asphalt in the parking lot. Graham started crying and flailing around. So here I was trying to push this cart of groceries out to my car juggling this awkward baby carrier. I made it to the car, popped the trunk, turned around and there's this guy in a short sleeve dress shirt with a wide 1970s-style necktie and polyester slacks. He said, "Brother, are you saved?"

Now, this wasn't an unusual thing for that time and place in the world, so it's not like I was ready to pull out a can of mace or anything like that. I kind of knew who this guy was anyway. He represented a church in town that was known for approaching people in parking lots for "salvation inspections" for lack of a better term. Most people were smart enough to avoid him or say whatever it took to pass inspection. But here I was, a fairly new father trying to load groceries in my car with a seven-month-old baby who was having a literal meltdown. So I said, "yes," thinking this would be a sufficient answer. Then he asked, "But are you born again?" See what I mean now? And I said, "Listen, I'm the pastor over at the First Christian Church, I've been a Christian for fourteen years. I'm fine." Then he proceeded to quiz me on seven denominationally specific questions to test my orthodoxy. Meanwhile Graham is working himself up to a point where if I don't get him into the car and get the air conditioner running, this guy is going to call his pastor to perform an exorcism on my baby. I finally said, "This isn't the time or place to have this conversation. I'm a Christian. I

love Jesus. Please just let me get my baby home before he explodes.” I was so mad! Why the heck did this guy think that the best way he could be of service to me was to quiz me about whether I met his criteria for “salvation” or his definition of “born again?” The best thing he could have done for me is to ask if he could help me load my groceries into the car, which is exactly what a Boy Scout would have done in that situation! Am I right? Can I get a witness? Thank you, Troop 2. Thank you for being here today. I appreciate all you do. Keep up the good work. God loves you and so do we.

The story Connie read this morning starts out with a man named Nicodemus, a Pharisee who was an expert in Jewish Law, who visited Jesus on the sly at night. Why did he visit Jesus at night? Maybe he wanted to test Jesus’ orthodoxy like the guy in the Food Lion parking lot. But I really don’t think that’s the case because most of the time when the Pharisees or Sadducees wanted to test Jesus’ orthodoxy, they tried to do it in the most public place possible to try to make him look foolish. Nicodemus was just seeking some honest answers from Jesus. But what was so risky that he felt he had to sneak around at night to find these answers? Why couldn’t he just talk to Jesus in the daytime during “normal office hours?”

Our theme for Lent this year is “Seeking: Honest questions for deeper faith.” Nicodemus was definitely seeking something when he visited Jesus. But the first thing he said

to Jesus wasn't a question at all. The first thing he said was, "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." That's not a question, that's a statement. But it's an *important* statement because the "we" tells me that there were other Pharisees who recognized that God was present in Jesus' life and ministry which is important because sometimes we buy into this idea that the Pharisees in the New Testament were all bad guys. Not true. Some of them "got it." But the fact that Nicodemus visited Jesus at night tells us that he and these other Pharisees who recognized Jesus were in the minority. Jesus responded to this statement by making one of his own – "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Now here's where we get the first question in this conversation: Nicodemus says, "How can one be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" This is Nicodemus seeking understanding. He's not sure whether Jesus is being literal or figurative. This is where Jesus explains to him that no one who wants to enter the kingdom of God can do so without being born of water and Spirit. And before you automatically think, "Water means baptism and Kingdom of God means heaven, so this means we can't go to heaven unless we're baptized" consider this - In the ancient world it was a common understanding that *everyone* was born of "water." That's how people of that time and culture understood birth. And this is true if you think about it. We all come out of the waters of birth and into a world where we

draw our first breath. And remember that in the language of the New Testament, which is Greek, there is no distinction between the word “breath” and “spirit.” It’s “pneumatōs” as in “pneumatic pressure, pneumonia, pneumatologist” and so forth. So yes, *everyone* who is born into this world has the potential to be a part of God’s kingdom because we *all* come out of the waters of our mothers womb and become air breathers. But in order to “get it” ... in order to *enter* into this kingdom of God, that is so radically different from the kingdoms of the earth, Jesus says that we must be born from *above* or “born *again*” as we say in the church. And to be born again, means to be born of the *capital* “s” Spirit which is the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit.

The woman who created the graphic on our bulletins for this week was raised in a Spanish-speaking Pentecostal church in Miami called “Renacimiento.” The simple translation of this word is, “rebirth” or “renaissance.” But for her church, it meant so much more. We sometimes say, “born again” but unfortunately, the picture that often comes to mind when we hear that term relates to the guy in the Food Lion parking lot whose chief concern is if I’m “saved.” But in her church, “renacimiento” or “re-birth” is a perpetual reminder that each time the church gathers to encounter Jesus, the Spirit calls us to *continuous* transformation. As we’ve said over the last few weeks, deep Christian spirituality is not a “one and done” deal. It’s not a “brother are you saved” kind of thing. It means calling that which is dead into Holy Spirit-filled life! Now ...was this what Nicodemus was seeking

from Jesus that night? Possibly. But either way, it's what he received, and we're all better for it. But *how* was Nicodemus, this Pharisee who "got it," transformed? Because when you read on through the end of our passage, it seems like Jesus just kind of shifts gears and leaves Nicodemus in the dust. What became of Nicodemus though? And was he ever "born again?"

In chapter seven of John's gospel, Nicodemus appears again when some of his fellow Pharisees become angry at the temple police for not arresting Jesus for "impersonating a Messiah." Nicodemus stood up for Jesus and said to his accusers, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" The other Pharisees got mad at him and said, "What, are you a Galilean too like your buddy Jesus?" Actually they said, "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?" but ... same thing, right? Then in chapter 19 Nicodemus shows up again after Jesus was crucified. He stepped in to help Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus who owned the tomb where Jesus would be buried. Nicodemus helped Joseph remain anonymous so that the authorities wouldn't punish him for providing a decent burial for Jesus. Nicodemus also provided some very expensive myrrh and aloes so that Jesus could be buried with dignity.

Throughout the history of the church, Nicodemus was lifted up by both Catholic and Orthodox traditions as being an example of one who sticks up for the church when it's under

persecution from the forces of corrupt religion and government. To the African Americans who were freed from slavery after the Civil War, Nicodemus was a model of rebirth as they sought to cast off their old identity as slaves. In fact, there was a town in Kansas that was founded by former slaves called “Nicodemus.” In an August 16th speech in 1967, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. invoked Nicodemus as a metaphor concerning the need for the United States to be “born again” in order to effectively address social inequality.

Nicodemus, like all of us, was born of water and spirit. But over time he was *re-born* in the Holy Spirit, and it showed in his words and deeds as he matured and grew in the Spirit ... as he was transformed by the power of the One who molds us and makes us into the image of Jesus. May our Lenten experience be a time of transformation and re-birth as we discover our call to live out our faith in Christ.