

## A Message of Love

Six years ago on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005, many of you sat in the same spot you are sitting now to hear the first sermon by your new pastor. I'd love to be able to tell you that it was memorable but even I didn't remember the gist of it until I looked it up this week. In the ensuing years, you've heard my voice quite a bit – in sermons, in prayer, in teaching, in meetings. Sometimes, I think, I've been able to bring you some reflections that were worthwhile. Sometimes, probably, not so much. But in the midst of all those words, I hope that you've heard one theme come to the fore again and again. It's the one message that I have that I truly want everyone to hear. God loves us. Our God, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebekah, the God of Jacob and Leah and Rachel, the God of Moses and the God of Elijah, the God who is the Creator of all things – that God loves us in the same way a parent loves a child, only more so. The Almighty God loves us so much that God became a living man, called Jesus, who taught us to call on God as our Abba, our Papa, our Father. The Gospel of John records that Jesus said these words one night to a man named Nicodemus: "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. 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."

So, today I want to explore that familiar passage. Some would say it is too familiar, that it has lost whatever meaning it once had by becoming the stuff of slogans and bumper stickers and signs waved by rainbow-wigged clowns at sporting events. But I believe that this message of love is at the heart of everything that Jesus did and everything that God does in our lives. And, I believe that the story of Nicodemus is still a challenge to us as we seek to be the Body of Christ in Lynnwood and environs in this Year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Eleven.

He came by night. The man called Nicodemus, a leader among those many considered most righteous in Israel, the Pharisees, came at night. Perhaps, as some scholars suggest, it was because the night was the best time to study Torah, after the day's tasks were done, when one could devote one's full attention to God's Law without interruption. He came by night, perhaps to be sure he could give his full attention to this fascinating new teacher, the Rabbi from Galilee who had emerged suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, at the center of the study of God's word, Jerusalem. He came by night, this leader of the Pharisees. Perhaps, as other scholars think, he came by night because he didn't want to be seen by others. Perhaps he was trying to keep his visit to this radical new teacher a secret from his fellows on the Sanhedrin. Perhaps he was there on their behalf, a secret envoy, with the mission of learning more about this threat to their authority, perhaps catching him in a verbal misstep. He came by night, John tells us in this most theological, most metaphorical of canonical gospels, and perhaps that is merely the author's setting of the story, a way of pointing out to readers and listeners that, despite Nicodemus' learning and standing in the community, where the truth of real relationship with God was concerned, he was in the dark. He came by night. Perhaps the correct interpretation is some combination of these three ideas. Maybe not even Nicodemus himself would be able to say.

This is the first point at which the story of Nicodemus challenges us. Are we slipping around to meet Jesus in the dark? That seems like a silly question, doesn't it? After all, here we are in the middle of a bright, sunny morning at a location on the busiest street in Lynnwood. But are we hiding our activities in plain sight? When I was a boy, I would often visit my Grandma Boyer in Herculaneum, MO, on a Sunday and accompany her to church. We would walk the few blocks

## A Message of Love

to the Baptist church, greeting neighbors on the way, dressed in our Sunday best with our Bibles tucked under our arms. There was no doubt where we were going. Most Sundays, though, I was at home, where church was too far to walk, but again, there was a real sense that everybody knew where folks in their cars, all dressed up, were headed. It's different here in the "None Zone," where the majority of people claim their religious affiliation to be "None." If our neighbors see us in our cars on Sunday morning, they have no reason to believe we're headed to church unless they know from us telling them that it's an important part of our lives. Do our neighbors know what we're up to? Do they feel invited, even encouraged to join us? Do they know how glad we'd be to share with them the love of God and of our friends that we find here? Or are we slipping along in the dark, hiding in plain sight?

Nicodemus greeted Jesus with respect, almost with effusive praise. Was he sincere? It depends in part upon your interpretation of his coming by night. The praise could certainly be a ruse to get Jesus to open up and say something that could be used against him later. It may be that Jesus does not respond in a conventional and polite way to Nicodemus' greeting because he doesn't trust him. His abrupt and rather odd response, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," may be a way of turning the tables on this spy for the Sanhedrin. But it may also be Jesus' way of responding to the questions that he knows are at the heart of Nicodemus' visit, questions he has not even had time yet to ask. There is a hint that John is sympathetic to Nicodemus. In speaking of Jesus' miracles and works, Nicodemus terms them as "signs," impossible to perform without the presence of God. This is the same word that John uses over and over again in this Gospel. There are other hints in John that Nicodemus is sincere in his greeting to Jesus, that he really does see God at work in this Galilean. In chapter 7, he falls out with his colleagues over their condemnation of Jesus without benefit of a hearing. And after Jesus' death, it is Nicodemus who helps Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus.

Jesus' first words to Nicodemus must have been surprising in a number of ways. Again, Jesus is certainly not following polite protocol, answering a compliment with a compliment. Instead, he issues what could be considered a challenge, even an insult. "Very truly, I tell you," he says, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." But to most Jews, and certainly to a leader of the Pharisees like Nicodemus, to be born a Jew, a child of Abraham, was to be part of the Kingdom of God by birth. Nicodemus is taken aback. What could Jesus mean, saying such a thing to him?

If we are to understand the interchange here between Jesus and Nicodemus, we must understand a bit of word play in Greek by John. Jesus says that to see the Kingdom of God, one must be born  $\alpha\nu\omega\theta\epsilon\nu$ . It is a word that can be translated as "from above," or "anew, again." Our NRSV translation has chosen to render Jesus' statement as "born from above," which makes Nicodemus' response unintelligible unless one either knows Greek or remembers this verse from another translation, such as the King James, the RSV or the NIV, where the more familiar "born again" is used. The NRSV translators' choice of "from above" does make sense in the context of Jesus' next statements about being born of the Spirit.

There is a good deal of ambiguity in Nicodemus' response to Jesus. Is he deliberately misunderstanding Jesus or is he genuinely perplexed? Is this Nicodemus the stooge of the

## A Message of Love

Sanhedrin or Nicodemus the seeker? Should we hear his question as disdainful, “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” or as confused, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” Those are the two standard choices in interpreting this passage. I wonder if they don’t give Nicodemus enough credit. If indeed Nicodemus has come as an honest seeker, with all of his knowledge of the Law and the Prophets, with his likely awareness of the message of John the Baptizer and his call for repentance, he may already be thinking about the importance of starting anew. How often, I wonder, has Nicodemus sung or prayed the words of David, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” Is Nicodemus really saying to Jesus, “How can I, an old man with decades of training, with years of ingrained habits, throw all that away to start again?”

To hear Nicodemus’ question as one that is both sincere and thoughtful is to hear a question asked with some anguish. If what Nicodemus hears is Jesus saying, “To be in God’s will you must throw away all you think you know and start all over again,” then Nicodemus hears Jesus’ call to him as difficult if not impossible. Here is another challenge of the Nicodemus story for us. To be born again would seem to imply a complete and immediate change, right here, right now.

There are those who, over the centuries since John recorded these words, have taken Jesus’ words to mean just that and have greeted them with joy. For those who are mired in brokenness and rebellion, the prospect of a fresh start, a clean break with the past, can be liberating. For them, the admonition to be “born again” is good news indeed. But that is not the experience of all of us. For some, the admonition to be “Born Again” carries memories of browbeating sermons full of hell and damnation – bullying preachers who, it seemed, would have been just as happy to see some burned as saved. For some, the message meant to be one of love instead became one of fear. For others, there is no clear cut “conversion experience” as our modern Evangelical understanding of the experience of being “Born Again” would seem to require. Instead, there is a slow dawning of understanding, a lifelong movement towards God, albeit one with many starts and stops, stalls and reversals, mountain tops of clarity, valleys of wandering.

It is more likely to be the kind of experience that Martin Luther described. Luther wrote of “*daily* dying and rising with Christ,” of “*daily* putting to death the old Adam,” that is, the old self which keeps trying to reassert itself during our life in Christ. I will cheerfully claim, in solidarity with my Evangelical sisters and brothers, to be a “Born Again Christian,” but it is Luther’s version of “Born Again” that I claim rather than that which some have called “crisis conversion.” As I’ve said here before, I knew no crisis at the time of my confession of faith, simply the realization that it was time for me to take such a step. And I have known the joy of spiritual rebirth time and time again since that night in early 1970 when I walked the aisle. It comes whenever I feel the touch of the Spirit of God, whenever I am caught with joy and awe at the splendor of God’s creation, whenever I allow myself to be aware of the deep love that binds me to my family and friends. The love of God helps me be “born again” again and again and again.

Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Some believe that he is here referring to the necessity of baptism. But, like a good Baptist, I’m uncomfortable with that interpretation. After all, our movement has traditionally rejected the notion that the act of immersion confers saving grace. Rather, Baptists

## A Message of Love

have historically understood baptism as a symbol, an act we perform to say to the world that we are now committed to following the way of Jesus, deeply meaningful to those involved but not a requirement of our relationship with God. So, I'm inclined to agree with those who see in Jesus' words a reference to physical birth, to the "breaking of water" that accompanies the birth of a child.

Here's our next loving challenge. In order to be a part of the Kingdom, the Beloved Community, we must be fully human, just as Jesus was, ready to reach out to our brothers and sisters in love and enter into relationship with them. But we must also be born of the Spirit, as aware of our spiritual nature as we are of our physical nature, as comfortable with our relationship with God the Father as we are with our human parents, our friends, our loved ones. To claim the Spirit as Mother implies an immediacy of relationship, with intentional contact between our spirit and God as often as we have physical contact with our parents as children. The moment at which we begin to wonder about spiritual things, what our purpose in the world could be, whether there is a God who is concerned about us, we begin to realize that we have a spiritual birth. When we nurture that part of ourselves, work on a vital relationship with the Living God, we start living what Jesus called eternal or abundant life. Nicodemus had already been born from above; Jesus just wanted him to see it.

Jesus had some more to say that I imagine was disturbing to Nicodemus and may be to us, sometimes, as well. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was committed to living by the Law. So careful were the Pharisees of God's Law, that they created additional restrictions and rules for their lives, the Oral Law, which they called "a fence around Torah," lest they come too close to breaking one of God's commandments. But living a life as one born of the Spirit has nothing to do with the landmarks and signposts of law. Jesus told Nicodemus, "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."

Nicodemus wanted to know how he must behave and believe to be worthy of the Kingdom of God. But Jesus told him it just didn't work like that. Rev. Dr. Laura Mendenhall writes, "Jesus told Nicodemus that life in God's kingdom cannot be earned or achieved... that to be born of the wind would mean allowing the Spirit to propel him along the way without any sense of his old securities. To be born of the wind would mean trusting God's love for him and for all people." To understand that one is born of the Spirit is to enter into a life of freedom and wonder.

Nicodemus must have been overwhelmed. The final words in this conversation are a question, perhaps squawked indignantly, perhaps whispered with awe: "How can these things be?" It sounds like a question from Israel's very beginning, echoed twice in Jesus' own family story. You may remember that when the strangers at the oaks of Mamre promised Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son, "Sarah laughed to herself, saying... 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old.'" And the response came, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Or how the angel told Zechariah in the Temple that he and Elizabeth would have a son. Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." Or Mary saying to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" God's good news is constantly surprising, especially when it comes to God's plan working itself out in unexpected

## A Message of Love

births or re-births. It is surprising even for those who have dedicated their life to following and serving God. The Spirit blows how it chooses.

There is, however, one path that we may be sure the Spirit will take again and again and again. It is the path of love. God's gift of love is life. Eternal life, Jesus calls it here. Elsewhere in John, he uses the phrase, abundant life. We often hear it spoken of in the context of life after death. It is that and it is more. It is ζοε αιωνιον, the life of the ages. It stands over and against the life of this age, life the way those who are not open to the Spirit think of life. It is life lived in pursuit of the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community. It is life lived in awareness that we are God's beloved children and that nothing can separate us from the extravagant, never-failing, gracious love of God. As I think of the story of Nicodemus recorded by John, I think Nicodemus must have finally understood that. In his last recorded act in the gospel, Nicodemus goes with Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus' body from the cross to the grave. He has brought with him the burial spices, over one hundred pounds of them. It is an extravagant gift to answer that extravagant love that Jesus introduced him to. Even for a wealthy man, it would have been a sacrificial gift. Nor was that all that Nicodemus was willing to give up for Jesus' sake. By his act, he exposed himself as a likely follower of Jesus, risking rejection and even arrest by his powerful colleagues on the Sanhedrin. By his act, he rendered himself ritually unclean, unable to participate in the remainder of the feast of Passover, one of the most important observances for this very observant Jew. But for all his false starts, his timidity, his poking around the edges, Nicodemus, it seems, was finally claiming that new birth, opening himself up to let the powerful wind of the Spirit sweep through his life.

What about us? Are we born again? Not just in the good old Evangelical sense of the term but open to the workings of the Spirit in our lives, allowing God to propel us along in God's way, ready to be instruments of God's love to the whole world, even for those we're pretty sure don't deserve it. Are we like Nicodemus at the beginning of the story, slipping through the darkness, questioning, perhaps cynical, wondering if Jesus really has anything new to tell us, anything that will change our lives? Or are we like Nicodemus at the end of the story, ready to give up everything we thought we knew to follow the one who is the way, the truth and the life? Wherever we are, God is ready to receive us into the Beloved Community, to receive us and mother us and never let us go. For God, our Mother and our Father, our Loving Creator, 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, abundant life, the life of the ages. 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. For this most loving gift, thanks be to God!