

April 19, 2015

The National Presbyterian Church

## **Fellow Followers: "Born Again?"**

John 3:1-10, Romans 8:9-17

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This morning we begin a new series of sermons looking at the lives of various individuals within the pages of Holy Scripture, some of whom are saints, some of whom are sinners, and most of whom are saints and sinners at the same time. Some of their examples we need to follow quite deliberately, some of we need to avoid quite deliberately – even if we have much to learn from them! Their lives are portrayed for us in scripture for our benefit and for our spiritual growth.

We begin our series this morning by turning to the person who is at the focal point of our reading in John's gospel Chapter 3, a man by the name of Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night. We are told in the scripture that this Nicodemus is a leader of God's people. He's a religious leader. He belongs to a group called the Pharisees.

In Jesus' day, the "professional religious leaders" were known as priests. Some of the priests were Sadducees, the guardians of the temple. You had to be born into the right family to be a priest. The Pharisees were not priests: they were not born into the right families! Rather, the Pharisees were a lay religious renewal movement, and like many lay religious renewal movements some people went over the top. They became over-zealous, over-particular about their faith and they ended up, many of them at least, in confrontation with Jesus Christ. And certainly some of Nicodemus' friends were among those who ended up in confrontation with Jesus Christ.

Some of Nicodemus' friends would have mocked Jesus, laughed at Jesus, treated him with disdain. For them, Jesus was the kind of person who came from the wrong side of the tracks, the wrong place. Jesus was from Galilee up in the north, and they were from the city. They were sophisticated. They were educated. He was from the country. He wasn't educated. They would have treated him with disdain. And this would have been the thinking in the group of people of which Nicodemus was a part.

There would have been some of them, too, who would have considered Jesus to be a threat. Sometimes people we think of as uneducated are deemed by us to be "dangerous," because they don't know the boundaries that they're supposed to observe. In the Middle East at that time (just as today) a little fire could kindle a large flame -- and some people were afraid that out of

naïveté, Jesus, or anybody with his kind of charisma, might end up causing real trouble in the region. To them, Jesus was a cause of fear.

So some of Nicodemus's friends would treat Jesus with disdain, some of them with fear – and this was the group, this was the circle, this was the realm, within which Nicodemus moved. But not quite! At least, as we come to John Chapter 3 Nicodemus certainly does not find himself at the center of this realm, but only on, or now on the periphery.

If Nicodemus's friends treated Jesus with disdain or thought that Jesus was dangerous Nicodemus himself wasn't buying it; another voice was speaking to his mind, saying, *"I've got to listen to this Jesus. There may be something in this Jesus that I need to pay attention to. He's not one of us but he seems to be tied in some way to God."* And so we find Nicodemus coming to Jesus, seeking Jesus out – by night. That's what the scripture says: he comes to Jesus "by night." He comes by night almost certainly because he doesn't want to deal head on with the opinion of his friends, who no doubt will mock him for coming to Jesus, for even approaching this person whom they despise or treat with disdain.

And when he comes he comes not quite sure of what it is that he wants from Jesus. So he makes this statement, he says to Jesus, *"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who comes from God*

[*"we"* here may just be a way of not seeming too personal, avoiding using *"I"*! The *"we"* certainly does not mean Nicodemus' friends and colleagues who do not believe that Jesus comes from God; though there may be a few others who are in Nicodemus' camp. See Joseph of Arimathea in John 19:38].

*"We know you are a teacher who comes from God for no one can do these signs apart from the presence of God."* Nicodemus sees what Jesus does and he sees that these things are good things, they are Godly things and there's something in him that wants to pursue Jesus. So he makes this statement.

And Jesus could very well just say, "Okay, Nicodemus. Thank you for these nice words. What exactly is it that you want me to explain or say?" But Jesus doesn't do this; indeed it almost seems as if Jesus ignores Nicodemus' words as he blurts back to Nicodemus a response, a statement that is seemingly unrelated to Nicodemus' words. And the statement is this. Jesus says, *"Very truly I tell you no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above."* As if to say, "D'you know what's really true? No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus has said nothing about the Kingdom of God but Jesus turns the conversation to this Kingdom, and says "You can't see the Kingdom of God unless you have been born from above."

Do you see that there seems to be a disconnect between what Nicodemus is saying and what Jesus is saying unless, somehow Jesus really does read Nicodemus' mind correctly? Unless what's going on is that Jesus is looking beyond the surface into Nicodemus' heart and sees what the issue really is. Nicodemus comes (perhaps as we sometimes come to God or to a friend) with

a question in our heart which we do not know yet how to formulate in words. We don't know what it is exactly that we want to say. But Jesus does!

When we read the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's gospel (4:16-18, 29), for example, we see Jesus talking to a woman at a well in a region called Samaria, and Jesus sees deeply into her heart and her personal history. She says one thing, but he knows what's really going on in her life and to her astonishment, he tells her. He knows it completely. And I think that's probably what's going on here, that Nicodemus comes to Jesus with more than a statement about who Jesus is; he comes with a real question that Jesus knows and seeks to answer.

Nicodemus doesn't just want to say to Jesus "I know there's something good in your life." He wants to ask Jesus about the Kingdom of God, as if Nicodemus' full statement would be something like this:

"I'm in this religious group of people and they don't seem to have the answers to the kinds of questions that I'm asking. In fact they're doing things and saying things that I don't agree with, and that do not seem to be godly, even if they're religious. But *what I* want to know about is the true realm of God, God's family, God's community, God's kingdom, and how I can know for sure that I am in that community. I know I've been religious all my life, but I'm just not sure of this. Jesus, I've heard enough from you to believe that maybe, maybe you have something to say that will help me at this particular point."

And so Jesus responds:

"You're thinking about the Kingdom of God aren't you? Listen, this is what you need to know: no one, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless you are born from above."

To which observation Nicodemus now does respond with a question. And the question is explicit and the question is filled with perplexity and the question is this: "How can anyone be born after growing old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" How can you be born a second time? I mean, I'm confused, more than ever: what is this you're saying Jesus?

He's not questioning Jesus' focus on the "Kingdom of God" as if Jesus is right on the mark there. But what's this business about "new birth"? Being born *again*? Or being born *from above*? – the Greek in the New Testament can go either way ("again" or "above") on that translation. How can you be born a second time? If that's what it takes to enter God's Kingdom, how in the world is it done? To which question, Jesus, as we read on in the passage, never really replies. He never really gives an explanation to this explicit question that Nicodemus asks. He just says it's necessary, it's vital. He says, "The Spirit blows where it will," as if to say, "Who can tell what method God chooses?" The spirit is involved and you need it. But he explains it no further. Leaving Nicodemus, and you and me, guessing as to what this new birth, this birth from above, this second birth, this being born again, is all about.

What in the world does it mean?

Well at least among Protestant Evangelicals there is a common understanding of the new birth that goes something like this: that being born again, being born from above, being born a second time, being born of the spirit is *pretty much equivalent to having a conversion experience which completely changes life*. Being born again, that being born from above, being born a second time, being born of the Spirit, is *pretty much equivalent to having an identifiable emotional experience that involves making some kind of a clear cut decision about Jesus Christ*. A clear cut acknowledgment that can often be pinpointed to a particular day or time in which there is an explicit acknowledgment that Jesus Christ is one's only Lord and one's only Savior; that Jesus is in fact one's King – and therefore that we belong within the realm or kingdom of this one who is the King.

And I would have to say that a long time ago; I had an experience exactly like that. In fact its 50 years ago this summer. It seems inconceivable to think that far back. At a summer camp I had an experience exactly like that that changed my life; a conversion experience that changed my life. I was 13 years of age at the time. It was just outside a town called Kincaig in the Highlands of Scotland at a Christian camp. The camp was a great deal of fun and the fun was only spoiled by the prayers at the beginning and end of the day that we had to attend: the price to be paid for the adventures and games in the middle. Like many of the boys there (there were only boys there) I would pretend that I wasn't listening to what was going on (because it wasn't cool to be seen to be listening to what was going on) but I really was. And at some point, it was late July or August of 1965, the words that were spoken became more than words. The story of Jesus of Nazareth, of his life and his death and his resurrection, his death on a cross for my sins became real and personal, as if this was about me, as if he had come to earth and died not just for the whole world, but for me in particular. And at a particular moment at that camp I made a decision to follow him, to acknowledge him as my Savior and my Lord and to ask him into my life to be my friend forever.

As with many young people and true for older people but especially when you're young you're trying to figure out who are your friends and who will be faithful to you? I desperately wanted a friend who would be faithful to me forever.

So I made this decision at a specific moment in time and my life changed. I've never regretted it. From that moment to this, Jesus has remained that faithful friend I wanted as a 13 year old, my Savior and my Lord.

I can trace this change in my life back to a particular moment in time. And when we look at the stories of people in the pages of scripture you can certainly find those who have had experiences like this, or far grander. And the grandest one of all is usually associated with a man by the name of Saul or Paul (his Greek name is Paul, his Hebrew name is Saul; his story is found in the Bible in the book of Acts, chapter 9), who was a persecutor of the church of Jesus Christ.

Paul believed that Jesus was committing blasphemy when he claimed to be the Son of God and that Jesus' followers were therefore deluded. He decided that the best thing he could do to serve God was to persecute those Christians, to arrest them, to put them out of business, to

squash by any means available the “false” message about Jesus. And so he makes it his business to do this. This is his “calling” – until a specific moment when everything changes. The “moment” occurs on the road between the cities of Jerusalem and Damascus, when there is this blinding flash of light and in the midst of this light he hears a voice, and it’s clearly the voice of the risen Jesus, saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” And he can’t escape it. This moment changes everything. There is a radical conversion, and Paul’s life is from that moment on forever changed; indeed he becomes, because of that moment it would seem, the greatest missionary of the early Christian church and perhaps of all time. We are here today, 2000 years later, in large part because of who he was and what he did and because of that particular explicit, identifiable experience.

So – some people they say well that kind of experience and the experience that I had on that hillside in Scotland long ago, well that’s what it means to be born again. And I think it’s quite likely that at that moment I was born again.

But the trouble that I have with that whole idea is this: that over the years since that time in the various churches I have served, I’ve met countless people who seem to know Jesus better than I know Jesus, who seem to love Jesus better than I love Jesus, who seem to love other people better than I will ever love other people, and who say to me that they’ve never had any experience like this at all. There’s no moment or experience they can point to, at which point in their lives they could say, “this was when I was born again.”

In fact one of the people who has over the years had a profound impact on my life, is one of those people who has never had an experience like that. She has had a profound impact because her faith was simple, straightforward, transparent and powerful. Her life was a life of integrity and humility and everybody who knew her could see. I mean it was there in everything that she did. I’ll call her Jean. She came up to me one night after church. In fact it was an evening service. It was rather like Nicodemus: it was by night! Everybody else had left and we were alone, and she said, “How can I be sure that I am a Christian? How can I be sure?”

And I said “What do you mean Jean? I mean if anybody is a follower of Jesus Christ, if anybody is in his Kingdom you are in his Kingdom.”

And she said “Yes but I’ve never had one of “those” experiences.”

“What experience?”

“The kind they show on television. The kind that people speak about. And they seem so confident when they speak about them. I’ve never had an experience like that,” she said.

And I said to her something like this. I said “Well, perhaps you don’t have to have an experience like that. Perhaps the experience that really matters is not *our* experience, but *Jesus’* experience of life and death and resurrection on our behalf – his incarnation on your behalf and mind, and our simple trust that he did this for us.

Then she said, “You mean maybe I don’t have to have that experience?”

I said “Maybe you don’t!” And I swear to you, she had the experience right there and then! Her eyes lit up. Her face began to shine as if to say, I may be in the Kingdom? I may be part of God’s family?

If I can tell that anybody is in God’s family, Jean was one of those people. But there are many others, some of whom have said to me, “I’ve known Jesus since I was this high! And I’ve never had an experience like that.” *And one of the intriguing things about the story of Nicodemus is that he, in fact, this one to whom Jesus said “You must be born again!” is in that same camp. As far as we can tell Nicodemus never had a remarkable emotional identifiable conversion experience. Instead what we find as we look at the story of Nicodemus is that it develops from John Chapter 3 through John Chapter 7 and into John Chapter 19 is that there was a growth in his understanding of Jesus over the long haul with no identifiable markers in it about specific decisions made for Christ but steps taken which were in fact very clear.*

So, at the end of John Chapter 3, in the story of Nicodemus where we meet him coming to Jesus by night, we’re not told that Nicodemus is born again right there and then. What happens next is that Jesus actually speaks a harsh word to Nicodemus: “You’re a teacher in Israel and you don’t understand these things?” Not exactly an invitation to faith or conversion! But a put down: “How come you of all people don’t get it?” And to begin with Nicodemus doesn’t.

But that’s not the end. In John Chapter 7 we see Nicodemus within his peer group – this group of Pharisees, religious leaders – and this group is now not just treating Jesus with disdain but want to get rid of him as someone who is dangerous. They want to arrest him and put him away. This is Nicodemus’ group. He’s one of them but he’s not. He’s broken with them quietly to come to Jesus and now he breaks with them again: when they want to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus now speaks up explicitly. He’s a lone voice; how hard that is! He speaks up and says “*You can’t do that. You can’t arrest a man who has done nothing wrong! Our law (meaning the Law of Moses and the Bible) says that we are to treat people with justice and you are not doing that here!*” He probably couldn’t believe that the words came out of his mouth, but they did. And his words were evidence that his life was beginning to change; that the peer pressure from his old peers was losing its grip on him; that the realm which he belonged to was being supplanted by another realm, another community of belonging.

So in John 7 we see Nicodemus beginning to shift and move from one kingdom, as it were, to another. And when we travel through another twelve chapters toward the end of John’s Gospel, to John 19, it seems that that shift or transfer has now taken place completely. In John 19 Nicodemus is one of the few people who stay with Jesus through his death. Jesus’ disciples, at least all the men, all run away, scared. On the other hand, some of Jesus’ disciples who were women had the courage to stay near Jesus even when he was crucified. It was dangerous. The crowd was against him. The religious leaders were against him. The Roman authorities were

against him. The women stayed, so too did Nicodemus. He was one of the few men who was there with Jesus at the end.

If you know anything about Jesus' body being taken down from the cross it may be that it's the name of a man called Joseph of Arimathea that you remember. He's mentioned in all four gospel accounts as the one who went to Pilot, asked for the body in order to give him a proper burial. What not so many people remember is that right alongside Joseph of Arimathea, in John's account, is Nicodemus. We read his story at the 38<sup>th</sup> Verse of John Chapter 19.

Joseph of Arimathea who was a disciple of Jesus though a secret one because of his fear of the Jewish leaders, [DR: so he and Nicodemus are two who are breaking with their original community] asked Pilot to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilot gave him permission. So he came and removed his body. [And then we read at Verse 39] Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night now also, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about 100 pounds and together they laid Jesus in the tomb that was nearby.

Both Joseph and Nicodemus are scared to begin with. They're not sure what it means to give allegiance to Jesus. But with the burial, their allegiance is now public. People are going to know. And some people are not going to be very happy with this. But these two men have thrown their lot in with Jesus.

- They are now taking care of Jesus *as if they were his sons in his family*.
- They are now saying that he is the one that they serve as their king and whatever *he wants in life and in death is what they want*.
- They now are acting as if his opinion matters more than the opinion of others. No matter what harm others can do it doesn't matter. They don't belong to them anymore. They belong to him.

So if anybody is . . .

So here's another question: Does this lack of memory detract one wit from the fact that we were all born? Not one wit does it detract from the fact that we were all born! We can't describe it, we can't remember it, but we were born and yet we still know we were born.

We know we were born not because we remember the moment of our birth; rather we know we were born because of the consequences of what happened afterwards, because of the family that we entered into, because of the relationships that were established because of that birth – relationships with parents, relationships with siblings, relationships with extended family. When you were born you were born into a realm or sphere – a community that affects you for good or for ill from that moment on. The close family, the extended family, the stories of that family, the heritage of that family, the genes of that family that are written into who we are – all of these point back to the fact that at some time or another we were born . . . whether we remember it or not.

It's really, in the end, not the remembering of the birth itself that matters but the sense that we now belong to a new community with new allegiances. That's what matters. And the same is surely true of the second birth.

Or to add to the picture – think of the second birth not just in comparison to the first birth, but, in comparison to adoption into a second family. Adoption: so we have our first family, our birth family. Maybe we've been abandoned by our first family; or maybe they simply don't have the resources to sustain us and help us flourish. So adoption is the best option. With adoption, that first family is no longer the sphere or community which is going to determine who we are. But a new family, a second family, will now determine who we are more than anything else: new parents, new siblings, new possibilities, new hope, new future.

Some of you may a few years ago have seen a movie called The Blind Side about a football player, pro football player, Michael Oher, who was adopted from the streets of Memphis into a family, the Tuohy family, and in joining that new circle, a whole new sphere of belonging, his life was changed forever. And ultimately is what the new birth is about.

The experience of adoption may be grand or it may not be grand. It may be painful or it may be wonderful. It may be memorable or completely forgotten, BUT it's the consequences which really matter. Which is maybe why in John 3 Jesus doesn't ever answer Nicodemus' question about "how can this be?" . . . The Spirit blows where he wills as if to say: please don't try to pin it down, or equate it with one particular experience (Yet, how tempted we are to do this!). It can happen in all kinds of ways. Your life is going to be different from mine. But one thing is for sure. If you have been born again you belong to a new community. Not like that first community Nicodemus belonged to, but like the new community he belonged to. New family, a new parent, a new father in Heaven, a new king to follow, new friends with whom he would live his life, a new courage, a new way of seeing things that comes not by flesh and blood but only by the power of God's Holy Spirit.

So our prayer perhaps should be this: "Lord Jesus I thank you for whatever experiences you've given me in the past – those that I can identify and those that I can't. Thank you for the journey you've led me on which has all its ups and downs. Wherever I've been, whatever I've done, please let me know that you have been at work in my life by the Spirit, to assure me that my first birth, important as it is, is not the end of my story, but just the beginning; that there is a new family, a new Kingdom, a new Lord, a new Father to whom I can belong, now and forever. And may that new Kingdom, that new family that new belonging, – may it impact my life for good, for God, for the benefit all kinds of people from this moment on and always. May God hear that prayer and answer it.

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