

## **John 3:1-17**

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>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.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

<sup>4</sup>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?” <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup>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.” <sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup>“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. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>“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.

<sup>17</sup>“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.

## Standin' in the Need of Prayer

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: John 3:1-17

Today, I want to propose to you that we live in a double bind. We recognize that things are off. Blood runs in the streets, and we can't see no way to stop it. Warfare leaves in us a hollow victory, if any victory at all. In our hearts we know that the right path has evaded us.

Is it that our problems are so difficult and intractable as to prevent solution? Is it that we know not where to turn? In truth, I do not believe that these are the problems. Human communities have been drawn to great political and religious truths from time immemorial. There may be political and religious differences of all kinds, but at the end of the day, almost any of these systems should have taken us farther than we have come. So, what has let us down? If our political thinking and our religious systems have not let us down, what has?

In Nicodemus we see a man engaged in just such a struggle. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He is a religious leader of importance. But in Nicodemus's belly there remains a feeling of emptiness. Something has gone stale and rote. His faith has become lifeless.

In this dissatisfied state, Nicodemus notices Jesus. Jesus seems to be everything that Nicodemus is not. The Spirit is alive in Jesus. He moves with energy. His conviction comes from his heart. Something stirs within him, and that thing, whatever it is, stirs those who encounter him. Almost in spite of himself, Nicodemus finds himself drawn toward Jesus. Nicodemus comes to him in the night, under the cover of darkness, attracted, but also stand-offish. Nicodemus starts with a bit of flattery. He avoids getting into the depth of the conversation right away. He makes pleasantries. He says, "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."

But Jesus brushes aside the formality. Jesus was never especially rude, but it is fair to say that he wasn't much for cocktail party small talk. Jesus was, shall we say, intense, always to the point. So Jesus answers the question that Nicodemus came with, even though Nicodemus had not even asked yet. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus has come, most certainly, to find out what about Jesus is so magnetic, to find out what truth it is that Jesus exudes in his very person. But Nicodemus, on the other hand, was scared to death of it.

Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." At this moment to Nicodemus makes a determinative choice. Oh, how subtle are human choices. And oh, how profound their impact. Nicodemus willfully misunderstands what Jesus is saying to him. Jesus tells Nicodemus the deep and profound truth he has come looking for, but Nicodemus plays a game with it. He trivializes it. He makes sport of Jesus' words. He avoids its meaning and thereby misses his opportunity.

Now, to fully understand what I mean, you will need to learn a little Greek this morning. Actually, you need to learn only one word, and you may have learned it before, in another

sermon. So, for those of you who, like me, aren't very good at other languages, fear not. This won't be very taxing. In fact, it will be kind of fun.

The Greek word I want you to learn is *anōthen*. Here, you try it – *anōthen*. *Anōthen* is one of those words with several meanings. *Anōthen* means 'from above.' It also means 'anew.' And it means 'again.' *Anōthen* – from above, anew, again.

Okay, Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness. He comes to see what Jesus has to say. But, as we shall see, Nicodemus comes, also, looking to leave a way out, an escape hatch, a retreat. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born *anōthen*." Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, or born anew, or born again."

Jesus is clearly telling Nicodemus a poignant and sometimes very difficult truth. To attain the realm of God, most of us have to change at least some significant parts of ourselves or our lives. And Jesus chooses the word '*anōthen*' because it conveys not only that one must change, but that that change will result in new and renewed life. Born anew, we change, we become new, and we become whole. Embedded in the assignment to change is the promise of new and fresh life.

And Jesus was also conveying that we are to reborn from above, that is, we are to be born of things of the spirit. Jesus was saying that mundane and worldly things obscure one's vision of the realm of God. Remember what the devil tempted Jesus with? The devil tempted Jesus with all he wanted to eat at the snap of his fingers. He tempted Jesus with wealth beyond imagination. And he tempted Jesus with power and control over all the dominions of the earth. Jesus told the devil that these temptations were lies, and that he would not be enticed with sugar-coated, hollow illusions, which promised happiness, but ultimately delivered misery instead. Jesus was telling Nicodemus the same thing. Jesus was telling Nicodemus that the worldly lures of life among the elites of his time, of wealth, and of power were deceptions, card tricks, sleights of hand. And Nicodemus knew this, for this is what drove him seek Jesus out Jesus in the night in the first place. But faced with the real and concrete choice to give up those hollow things, Nicodemus could not do it. Jesus was telling Nicodemus that to attain the realm of God, one must turn away from these idols of earthly delight and look to the hopes and values and possibilities which come from God, from the spirit, from above, from being born anew, if you will.

Jesus was telling Nicodemus something of profound importance. But it was something that, if Nicodemus were to listen to it, would shake the foundations of his existence. So Nicodemus made a choice. He makes the choice to take the escape. Nicodemus plays a silly game, a game which allows him to push aside the important gift that Jesus was trying to give to him. Nicodemus says, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Nicodemus insists on the most literal meaning of what Jesus had told him, Nicodemus insists on hearing what Jesus most obviously was not saying, Nicodemus insists on turning profound truth into a word game, Nicodemus sneers at Jesus' honest offering and thereby misses, no sidesteps, no tramples all over the point. Nicodemus tramples all over the point. Nicodemus ridicules Jesus. Nicodemus intentionally and willfully misunderstands Jesus. He makes Jesus sound like a bad joke. And Nicodemus turns his back on Jesus and Jesus' words, both of which surely could have opened the realm of God to him. How sad the choice Nicodemus made.

Watch out for wily words. Watch out for words which are meant to steal the show and batter the truth.

Let me give you an example from today. Over the last fifty years there have been a number of significant movements of high moral importance. We have struggled with the famous isms of race and gender and sexual identity and class. And while it is easy to reel them off in a list, these movements have made profound human gains. In the beginning of the era, George Wallace could stand in front of the University door and justify that no blacks be allowed. In the beginning of the era there was broad acceptance of the idea that a woman's place was in the home. At the start of this time gays and lesbians never thought of being out, for condemnation was nearly universal. At the beginning of the era a person who was homeless, living on the streets, wearing rags was called a bum, indicating that his situation was his own fault. In all of these areas things have changed, at least somewhat. We are more human, we have more complex understandings, and we are more accepting of difference. But now, there is a backlash against these moral gains, and the strategy of the backlash is exactly the same strategy Nicodemus employed – trivialize the truth. Call it politically correct. I know of no more insidious and dishonest charge than the charge of political correctness. With one master-stroke of the brush it seeks to paint the most significant gains toward justice in the last half century as laughable ideas imposed by over-zealous demonstrators. Just like Nicodemus, faced with challenging truths, many in our time have willfully misrepresented those truths in order to avoid their implications. Ultimately it is disastrous choice.

\*\*\* Now, I don't think it is too much of a stretch to say that, on a societal scale, at least to a lesser degree, many of us sitting here today personally struggle with the same issues that are in the scene between Jesus and Nicodemus. It is tempting to sidestep Jesus' message. And if I am right about that, then it will be well to understand why Nicodemus couldn't bring himself to open his heart to what Jesus was telling him. It may be helpful to understand what was so hard for Nicodemus. For the same things may be hard for at least a few of us, and for our society, too.

The first thing to say is that temptations are, well, tempting. We talk of tempting desserts, the temptation to cheat to get ahead. The devil banked on the idea that when he showed Jesus power, privilege, wealth and ease from that mountain top, Jesus would find them alluring, and he would fall hard for their siren song. After all, the devil had bought and continues to buy souls with offerings that are far less persuasive than those he had Jesus survey.

Temptation is also enticing because it sends us craving. It takes dead aim at our most vulnerable propensities and delusions. Temptation promises us that satisfying our cravings will lead to happiness. If I have that new car, that good job, if I were rich, if the most beautiful woman or the most handsome man would just but fall in love with me and sweep me off my feet. If the kids were better, or if I could just retire, or if, if, if. Nicodemus had some ifs, Nicodemus had some cravings that he was pretty sure Jesus was telling him would never bring him the realm of God – peace and happiness and spiritual well-being – Nicodemus was pretty sure Jesus was telling him his cravings wouldn't work, and he just couldn't tolerate letting go of them.

The story of Jesus and Nicodemus prompts us, then, to take an inventory, to take an inventory of those things that have such a strong grip on us that we cannot imagine letting them go. Janice Joplin sang, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." It sounds pretty negative. But she was onto something. I can't tell you how many people I know who have

found freedom in failure, who have found that when they have lost all those things they thought would make them happy, when they have lost all those things they were sure they could not live happily without, they have experienced happiness and joy like none they could remember. So the question, then, is, what things are you holding onto so tightly that you can't let them go? What things are a craving for you? What things are betraying you by keeping you from answering Jesus' invitation?

And I think we owe it to ourselves to ask the same questions of our society and our country. What are we Americans grasping onto? What are we trying to protect without giving enough regard to others? In what ways are we trivializing the truth so that we don't have to face it? In what ways are we, the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth risking missing the most important things in the world?

Individually and collectively, Jesus utters an invitation to us. Come. Be born anew. Come. Be born from above. Come. And see the true well being that God has in store for you. Amen.

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