

Lent 2 – March 12, 2017
John 3:1-17
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No one would ever have suspected a person of his stature in the community to be flirting with such danger and intrigue. Some might have gone so far as to say he was leading a double life. He was a respected scholar and teacher, and sat on the supreme court. His opinions, his thoughts and words carried weight. Colleagues sought him out for his wisdom and guidance in sticky cases. He knew the law, loved the law, loved debating its interpretation and applying it. For him, the law was safe. The law provided structure and boundaries. The law ensured holy order. That's why he loved it so. It gave stability, predictability, security, and dignity to life in the community.

Recently, he had been hearing stories about a young teacher whom he'd never met. An attractive man he was told, and "different". He wasn't exactly sure what his friends meant when they said this one was "different". No pretense, a "shoot from the hip" type, they had said. Totally unconcerned about networking, or spending time hanging out with the powerful, popular, and prestigious men in the community, they had said. He was an outsider, sort of a hick - didn't hail from Jerusalem. No one was sure who he had studied with or what kind of credentials he had. But word on the street was that he could perform miracles, in addition to being a cracker-jack, sort of whimsical teacher. He had recently turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana, they had said. And no one had a clue how he did it. Quite an intriguing figure, this new young teacher was, and creating an excited buzz wherever he went.

Nicodemus and the other leading Pharisees in his circle spent most evenings studying and debating the Torah. This was the best way to learn – through lively debate, where you had to think on your feet to parry and pose a challenging comeback to inadequate or flawed reasoning. It was one of Nicodemus' favorite ways to learn and stretch himself as a teacher of the law. It was how he kept himself sharp and engaged with their Scriptures and God's work in their history as covenant people.

After his usual study session with his brother Pharisees ended one evening, Nicodemus decided this was the night he would pay Jesus a visit. To be truthful, he was a bit fearful of going to see Jesus. And he wasn't yet ready to let others know he was interested in learning more about the young rabbi. He suspected his fellow Pharisees would not think this a good idea for him, a man of such prominence in their community, to be chatting with a new, unorthodox rabbi, who seemed by all accounts to be largely self-taught. And who also seemed to be attracting a sizeable following, especially after the miracle at the wedding Cana.

Nicodemus wasn't sure yet exactly what he would say to Jesus when they met face to face. Maybe, "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, rabbi. I heard about your turning water into wine at Cana. Did that really happen? How did you do it? Why did you do it?"
Or –

“Some are saying you are the Messiah, sent from God. You couldn’t turn water into wine without getting the power from God to do it, so *are* you the Messiah?”

Or –

“If you are from God, why haven’t we heard about your studying with our rabbis? Why are you so unconventional in interpreting the scriptures?”

Nicodemus thought it best to keep his decision to visit Jesus to himself. He would just be spontaneous when he met Jesus. Let the conversation flow naturally. After all, they were both teachers, both faithful to Yahweh as far as he knew. And what rabbi doesn’t love the give and take repartee with other bright minds?

He went late in the evening, well after dusk, to the home where Jesus was visiting with friends. As he got closer the door his heart started beating faster. His breathing became more rapid. Standing there, not knowing what to expect, he took a deep breath and knocked. He told the man who answered the door that he had come to see Jesus. After sharing introductions and some initial pleasantries about Jesus’ travels in the area, Nicodemus says to Jesus, “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.”

With simple directness Jesus responds, “Truly, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above”.

Nicodemus has been a long-time diligent scholar of Torah. “Born again” is the literal interpretation of what Jesus says, and this is what Nicodemus hears.

You must be born again to see the kingdom of God.

“Born a second time? How does a grown man get back inside his mother’s body to be “born again?” Nicodemus says it in jest, but underneath he is feeling nervous, increasingly exposed and vulnerable.

Very directly, Jesus again speaks and moves the conversation beyond the surface meaning, beyond the literal, from Nicodemus’ exact parsing of words to a completely foreign and mysterious land of holy unknown possibility. “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

This isn’t going quite the way Nicodemus expected. They seem to be talking past each other. Nicodemus, known for his clear thinking and articulate speaking is left silent and feeling off balance. He searches for a rational response to words that seem to him to be riddles. “How can these things be?” he says, scratching his head. He had come prepared to do the questioning, but he becomes the one being questioned by statements that make no sense to him, for which he has no response. Though he is confused and disappointed and falls silent, Nicodemus is keenly aware that he has come here with a yearning to know the source of Jesus’ spiritual authority and self-assuredness. It is a gnawing within Nicodemus that will not and cannot forever remain quiet and tamped down.

In the days and weeks that follow, Nicodemus continues to hear stories about the unusual things Jesus is saying and doing. He remains very curious and increasingly unsettled. He did not go to meet Jesus with the intention of being changed in any way.

Unbidden, Nicodemus' mind plays and replays that one strange conversation he had with Jesus. The memory is vivid still. Sometimes it comes in his night dreams when it's still, and dark. Other times it appears in his daydreams when it is light and life around him swirls with activity. The memory does not fade. In fact it seems to become sharper, more vivid, more *real*. On some level deeper still, he hears similar, yet different words speaking to his heart.

"Come into the light of day, Nicodemus, you who are so full of yourself. Come into a place of real spiritual maturity. God has still more for you. God is ready to be about this hard work, this sweaty labor of bringing you fully to a new birth as a whole person – body, mind, heart, and spirit. Socially, religiously, intellectually, economically you are a success. You have arrived at a place of power and influence. People of faith look up to you, even depend on you. You honor and pass on our heritage loyally, admirably. But are you completely alive, Nicodemus? Is your vision of who God is and what God wants to do in you too small? Could there be more to this God than you know? Truly, there is a wild and unpredictable side to this God, a life-giving Spirit that blows freely where it wants and cannot be contained in any way – not in any human system, good as that system of law and order and reason and tradition may be. Part of you knows this, and longs for more – why else would you have come to see me? The God with whom I walk is not safe, but God is good and God wants to give birth to newness in you. And with this possibility you are both exhilarated and terrified."

In John's gospel it is risky business to engage in conversation with Jesus. It will always lead to a challenge and an opportunity for transformation. Not everyone is ready to embrace that invitation when it comes.

Nicodemus appears two other times in John's gospel. The next time he is defending Jesus in front of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court, trying to help Jesus get a fair trial, to no avail. The final time Nicodemus appears in John's gospel is just after the crucifixion, when he brings spices for wrapping Jesus' body, which will be placed in the tomb secured by Joseph of Arimathea, another wealthy man who was thought to be a "secret disciple" of Jesus.

Like Nicodemus, we don't always welcome the inconvenience that meeting Jesus brings, because he turns our lives upside down, calling us to look and think beyond what we already think we know of God's will and ways. The work of being transformed into disciples is hard work. It is the Spirit's work, and it is a process that happens over time. Just when we think we finally have Jesus and God figured out and can keep them safely contained, we can expect to be undone like Nicodemus. The overturning of our certainties can be a good thing, if it helps us recognize the ways God's Spirit blows into

and out of our lives all the time. Always the Spirit is bringing gifts we need – love, healing, forgiveness, peace, purpose, reconciliation, courage to do justice. Sometimes we need the upending of our certainties to break open our hearts and imaginations in order to receive all the abundance that God has to give and wants to shower upon us.

This *is* a birthing process that comes from above. It is God's doing in us and for us. Our job is to breathe, relax, push occasionally, and let the birthing happen. That is not the same as saying it will be easy and painless. It isn't for God, and it won't be for us. The process of transformation means letting go of things that are taking up space and blocking the birthing of a new mind, heart, and spirit in us. Our job is to pay attention to those things, be aware so that we can let the Spirit move them out of the way. Those blocks are things like becoming defensive when someone speaks the truth, flaring up in anger when we don't get what we want, panicking and worrying when we feel like we are losing control, focusing on the sins and flaws in others rather than examining our own hearts, allowing daily distractions to keep us from rest, prayer, reflection, and being present to those we love and to others in need.

"In Zen Buddhism the story is told of a young professor who visits a Zen master asking to receive enlightenment. The master offers the young professor a cup of tea. He pours the tea into an empty cup. He continues pouring even after the teacup is full and the tea spills over the edge and fills the saucer. The master continues pouring. As the tea spills onto the floor, the young professor is no longer able to contain himself. "Stop!" he cries, "it can't hold any more." "Exactly like you," the master replies. "How can you be open to receive enlightenment when you are already so full of yourself?" *

The self-emptying is real dying, you know. And that's the hard part, trusting that new life will come through the dying. It's one of the hardest parts of becoming a disciple. Maybe Nicodemus learned this over time. We have these days of Lent to begin learning it, too. The dying and the birthing go hand in hand in God's upside down kingdom. And on the other side of the dying is the insistent and wondrous cry of the newly born. Life in all its glory, for us and in us. For the sake of this whole world God so loves.

**quoted by Thomas R. Hawkins in "The Learning Congregation". (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press, 1997), p.33*