

Nic(odemus) at Night

John 3: 1-17

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, 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 said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Someone once asked a young woman, “What is the difference between my religion and yours?” She responded, “They are actually quite close. In fact, only two letters separate our beliefs. Your religion

is spelled, ‘D-O; DO.’ Mine is spelled: ‘D-O-N-E; DONE.’”

“How do you spell religion?” That very question confronted and confused Nicodemus. He should have known the answer – he was a leader in the church. And not just any leader, either; he was a Pharisee. That title may mean little to us, but it was significant in Jesus’ day. The Pharisees were the ultimate in the Jewish laws and people committed to their religion.

They had, for example, many rules dictating acceptable behavior on the Sabbath. Because God prohibited work, they carefully measured their food so as to only carry what weighed less than a dried fig. They prohibited a woman from picking grains of wheat and eating them, for that required two kinds of “work” -- harvesting and “threshing.” Their acts of devotion seem ridiculous to us, yet we’re impressed by the seriousness with which they practiced their faith.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and “a ruler of the Jews,” a member of the Sanhedrin, the religious supreme court, those 70 men governed the Jews under the ultimate authority of the Roman Empire. They had “wide-ranging powers in civil, criminal, and religious matters.” They could both arrest people and conduct trials.

So Nicodemus was no fool; he was both highly educated and sophisticated. So, we’re not surprised that Jesus’ conversation with him contains subtle reasoning, complex scriptural references and deep spiritual truths.

It is a favorite teaching method of Jesus; and it is a favorite writing tool for John in his Gospel – repetition. . In this case the main point is: “You must be born again.” Verse 3: “Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” He repeats himself verse 7: “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”

The phrase has been used countless times since by famous and even infamous people. The Rev. Jim Jones claimed to be born again before leading hundreds of people to death in a suicide pact.. Forbes magazine has described certain companies as “Born-again Companies.” And even Madonna said, “When my daughter was born, I was born-again.”

In spite of the misuse and abuse of the

phrase, it was first spoken by Jesus, and we will seek to learn from it today. Three truths to observe in this text, all of which tell us why Jesus said, “You must be born again.”

First -- We must be born again because of the nature of the kingdom of God. Nicodemus is a conflicted man. He is not sure what to think about Jesus. He has seen these “signs” (verse 2) and he is clearly impressed. We do not know if he was personally at the wedding, where Jesus changed the water into wine, but he had certainly heard of the miracle. And this verse makes it clear that Nicodemus has seen other miracles himself. So he concludes that Jesus must be from God.

Nicodemus also admits that Jesus is a teacher and he calls him Rabbi. This is a complement; Nicodemus, the older Rabbi is “graciously” treating Jesus as a peer, as a man to be honored. We would not go so far as to say that Nicodemus is “buttering up” Jesus, but he is certainly speaking OF him and TO him with some respect.

At the same time, he visits Jesus under cover of night. He is the original Nic at night! GOOD friends who want to be IDENTIFIED with the Rabbi don’t come at night. Good friends don’t have to imply that there are others standing behind them, unseen, who have the same questions or issues.

Nicodemus has not yet made a decision about Jesus. He is saying: “Jesus, some friends and I have been talking and some of us are impressed with you. We are considering joining your team, and being on your side. We are thinking about choosing you to be the next great leader of Israel. What do you think about that?” Nicodemus has criteria by which he is measuring potential leaders and possible Messiahs, and he is “complementing” Jesus by telling him that he made it through the first cut.

“Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” How about that for an amazing but puzzling answer? What does it mean?

While Nicodemus is recruiting, Jesus will have none of it! “It is not that kind of kingdom. You ‘see’ princes born of women. My kingdom is not about YOUR choosing me to be your King; it is God choosing you to be his daughter or son.” Don’t ask Jesus if he is ready to be the leader; ask yourself if are you ready for the King? Have you been born

again? That’s what it takes to be a part of the Kingdom.

Nicodemus reminds us of the danger of imagining ourselves as great members of God’s team. Nicodemus could see the great things that would happen if Jesus were on the Messianic throne. But Jesus responds – “What you see is not my kingdom.” The Kingdom of God is not about a great group of men banding together to change the world. It is about a great God sending a savior to redeem the world.

Sometimes in the church people think, “Wouldn’t it be great if a rich, or powerful or popular superstar were to become a committed Christian?” It’s not that kind of Kingdom!

But in this precious Gospel we learn that even those with weak beginnings may turn out to be strong believers. Nicodemus’ start was not good. He is afraid of his friends and unsure of the Savior. But after this encounter, Nicodemus would later defend Jesus before the Jewish leaders and he would help prepare Jesus’ body for his burial when the Lord’s closer friends were afraid for their lives and nowhere to be found. He came as Nic at night, but matured by the power of the Holy Spirit to a committed and faithful follower.

Jesus then tells us that we must be born again because of the nature of the flesh. Jesus’ response about needing to be born again confuses Nicodemus. So he answers sarcastically: “Am I, a grown man, to reenter my mother’s womb?”

No, of course not, Nicodemus. The answer is more simple and much more subtle. “You think only of children born naturally. You believe that your relationship with God is based upon your birthright. You were born a Jew and you assume, therefore, that you automatically enter God’s kingdom. But having the right genes, or even having believing family members is not the key to the kingdom. God’s kingdom is entered by a spiritual birth, not by tracing your family back to believers.

Many children grow up in the church assuming they have entered the kingdom of God. Not because they believe, but because mommy or daddy believes. But that which is born of the flesh is flesh. Having Christian parents and sitting in Christian churches makes many a fine Pharisee; the work of the Spirit is necessary to enter the kingdom of God.

It's not regular Missouri Synod terminology, but have YOU been born again? Verse 8 reminds us: we do not know where the wind comes from or where it goes. You need not put a date on your conversion or explain how it happened. It does not matter if you made a public declaration about turning your life over to Jesus, or had a mountaintop experience. But the wind of the Holy Spirit can be heard. And if you have been born again, the effect of the Spirit is known to God and should be detectable by others.

To every child whose parents are Christian, I can say: You are specially blessed. You are in God's House to hear the Words of Jesus, to see his sacraments celebrated, to sing his praise and join in the prayers. You have parents who pray for you, who read the Bible to you, and who teach you the great truths of the Christian faith. You have every blessing, including a great and special sign of God's covenant in your baptism. Don't despise the privileges given you -- they really are awesome! But remember this -- to enter the kingdom of God, you too must be born again.

Finally, we must be born again because of the nature of the Savior. It has been said that the history of religion is the account of mankind's attempts to climb back to God. At one time our first parents were close to him. After God made the first two people, they walked in fellowship together and God delighted in his children just as they delighted in him.

But then something went terribly wrong. We call it "The Fall," because we fell away from God. Where love once reigned, there was now tension and distrust. Fear drove out trust. Rebellion replaced obedience. No longer was mankind innocent; we had "fallen" from that high and lofty place into the muck and mire of sin. Our hearts were now set against God. We no longer enjoyed having God tell us what to do; we want to do it our way.

So religion attempts to answer the question, "How does one get back to God?" Some sacrifice themselves in a holy war. Others strive to obey the law. Some fast and take vows of poverty.

Nicodemus understands the issue. He was part of a religion that had based everything on being better than someone else. He has spent his entire life

climbing a ladder in an effort to get back to God. He is near the top -- he just needs the final rung to be supplied by the Messiah. "I have done everything to please God; all I need to know is: What is that one last good thing I must do to enter the Kingdom?"

All other religions reply with D - O -- DO.

Jesus alone replies: D - O - N - E -- DONE.

How can these things BE? That was Nicodemus' question. They CAN be -- they MUST be. It is not your work to do; it is His work, and it has been done. By the grace of God, you are born again of water and by the Spirit.

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