

“Confused Questions & Ambiguous Responses”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor

Wausau First United Methodist Church, Wisconsin

May 13, 2018

John 3:1-9

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 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?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, 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. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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 said to him, “How can these things be?”

People came and went as I sat in the B.K. Smith room on Tuesday afternoon, waiting their turn to shop at the Personal Needs Closet. A young man in a t-shirt and sleeve tattoos came in and sat on one of the blue chairs under the pictures of the stained glass window. After a few minutes, he moved to the table. A few minutes more and he asked the room, “Want to hear a funny story?”

“The police pulled me over this morning. I didn’t have any ID and I was like, this is the end. But they only gave me a warning! I thought I was gone. When I saw the lights, I stepped on the gas. I got faster for a minute. Then I thought, “Huh-uh.” I stopped. And they only gave me a ticket for an expired license and a warning. God is good. I was scared. I didn’t have any ID; all I had was this.” He held up a birth certificate.

“I haven’t used my name for eight years. I used to be a different person and I thought there was some bad stuff on my name, so I didn’t use it. Eight years. I just moved here from Savannah and I got a job. I do good work. He said, ‘I looked at your stuff for five days. Nothing. You’re clear.’”

A woman across the table asked his name. “Peter Davis... I got my name back. It’s like a new life. I have a second chance.”ⁱ

Jesus talks about new birth today. His listener hears something that sounds promising. It’s as if Jesus is offering a fresh start.

Did Nicodemus hear Jesus words and wonder to himself, “If I do this, what happens to me?” Did he feel at a heart level that Jesus was offering something he needed? We don’t know.

What we do know is that this man is a leader, a man of influence. He has a lot to lose if word gets out that he’s paying visits to this rabble-rousing Galilean. Shallow thing, perhaps, but these are the things that keep us from embracing new ideas and new relationships. Even when the possibilities seem *very* good, letting go of the old can be hard.

Embracing a different way is the very thing Jesus is talking about. Jesus’ purpose while he was among us was to point to God and to God’s realm. “But,” he tells Nicodemus, “Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to – to God’s kingdom” (*The Message*)

This is reminiscent of Psalm 127: “Unless God builds the house, the builders labor in vain.”

Scholars talk about Nicodemus’ motivation but this doesn’t really matter. He comes and Jesus makes the most of the opportunity. Both men are identified as teachers, yet in this exchange Jesus is clearly the one who understands, and Nicodemus, the student who does not.

Nicodemus offers a greeting and some flattery. Jesus gets into the heart of the matter, “Unless someone is born anew, it’s not possible to see God’s kin-dom.”

The wording the gospel writer uses can mean born from above, born anew or born again. Nicodemus sputters, “How can a person be born again?!”

Ah, born again... John employed many plays on words. This one, unfortunately, has interfered with many people’s faith.

For some Christians, primarily of the Fundamentalist bent, faith requires that a person be “born again.” Some of you can probably tell the exact hour of the day that you accepted God’s offer of

grace into your life. I do not want to dismiss this, yet for other people faith is more of a gradual dawning of awareness or an aspect of our life that seems always to have been there. We cannot think of a time when we did not know God. Any of these ways of coming to faith can lead to a vibrant, active relationship with God and neighbor.

Yet, and this is the harder part, there are those who believe their way is the only way. Most in the “born again” crowd fall into this category. Their black and white understanding can not only give Christianity a black eye. Worse, by trafficking in fear, as if loving and being loved by God requires a secret password and membership card, they wreck relationships and corrupt other people’s faith, by building walls instead of bridges.

This is a hard thing. That work John uses is a Greek word. This wordplay doesn’t work in Hebrew or Aramaic, the languages Jesus would have known. So this wording was strictly the gospel writer’s idea. “Born again” is a human not a God idea.

Having said that, if it works for some people, that’s fine. As United Methodists, we respect the diversity of opinions held by conscientious persons of faith. John Wesley followed a time-tested approach: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.”ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, unless it’s positively vital, let the others do what seems best to them. Loving God and loving God’s other children is vital. How we come to do it, not so much.

Today’s lesson is full of spiritual misunderstanding and confusion.

We tend to talk about having faith as if it’s a once-and-done action but faith is not something one gets or has. It’s an ongoing work of the Spirit who blows where she chooses. For some of us the Spirit’s action and faith is a dramatic event; for others it’s gradual.

Believing is what one *does*. It’s an action, a doing, one that’s affected by all the uncertainty that comes with being human.

Nicodemus is not believing when we meet him. But he is listening. He takes Jesus literally at first. So Jesus tries to clarify, inviting him to imagine the Spirit as wind. “You don’t know where the wind comes from or where it goes, but you *experience* the wind. Even if you can’t comprehend rebirth through the Spirit – or from above – you can experience it. Come and see!”

Like Nicodemus, some of us live in cognitive certainty. We know what we know. We know what doesn’t fit with what we know. Jesus invites us to experience a different knowledge by leaning into the unknowable.

Faith is experiential. It defies rational explanation. It’s easy to describe but not so easy to live into. Believing involves trusting in something that’s beyond our senses.

Accepting the words is not enough. We have to let ourselves be opened to another way of “seeing” things. The Spirit’s way. We come into God’s realm through the Spirit.

This story takes place at night. Light and darkness, belief and unbelief are held in tension as Jesus asks us, “Will you continue in darkness or will you come to the light?”

Saying, “Yes,” is easy. Living into belief is complicated.

Part of what I love about this Nicodemus story is that he is honest. He has questions. What does this mean? How can this be? He doesn’t get it. And yet, he keeps coming back.

The other part I love is that Jesus accepts him where he is. He cares enough to work with him, challenging him to take a leap into a spiritual reality that doesn’t show up in his intellectual perceptions.

Nicodemus is any of us. He “has a lot going for him, but he is not plugged into Jesus.”ⁱⁱⁱ Not yet. He does not realize that God intends more for him, intends for him to come alive more fully and share his gifts more completely than he does at present. God intends this for us as well.

God’s prevenient grace, as United Methodists call it, has been working on Nicodemus, preparing him to look more deeply at himself and at what Jesus offers, making him want the God connection that Jesus is pointing to. That same prevenient grace works on every one of God’s people, preparing us for a time when we will chose to follow God’s lead.

“[We are often] less aware than Nicodemus of our desire for connection with [God], because we are comfortable, secure in our status in the community, our reputations, or our perceived value...”

iv

Thankfully, God is constantly seeking after us, until finally we say, “Yes!” and let ourselves be plugged into all that God has in store for us.

This isn't something we do on our own. We are simply saying yes to God's effort. We may even need to do it more than once. Believing is complicated, as challenging as being who God makes us to be, as consuming as living fully human lives. Yet we can trust that God continues to accept us and welcome us as we work through it.

We are human. We wonder. We fret. We challenge. Since God makes us this way, it's okay to work from this reality. More often than we admit, we need to ask Nicodemus' question. "How can this be?" We need to play with the answers that come to us, wrestle with them and live into them as we grow closer to this God who loves us so dearly.

ⁱ Not his real name.

ⁱⁱ "Our Doctrinal Heritage," *The United Methodist Book of Discipline*, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jaime Clark-Soles, *Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*, 33.

^{iv} *Ibid.*