

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/JUNE 7, 2009

TWICE BORN?/JOHN 3:1-17

REV. DR. LYNN CHEYNEY

I. PRAYER: Loving, caring, hoping God, we turn our faces and our hearts again your direction to receive from you a word of grace, a word of challenge, a word of hope. Amen.

II. THE NIGHT VISITOR

He came to see Jesus one night. Nicodemus, a pillar of the temple, a Pharisee who, by this time in his life had all the answers; for him everything was settled... he was a finished product. As a Pharisee he'd spent a lifetime studying, discussing, interpreting and then keeping the law with all the strictness he could muster. Some scholars suggest he was just showing up for a typical late-night-rabbinic debate; others imagine he was a troubled seeker – the text does not let us in on the secrets of Nicodemus' heart. What we know is that Nicodemus comes to meet Jesus under cover of darkness – and they have a conversation that challenges his soul and every soul who will ever hear or read about it from that day on.

This is the scenario that the lectionary asks us to ponder this Sunday morning:

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴Nicodemus 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?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The 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." ⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹"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. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶"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. ¹⁷"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.

III. TWICE BORN?

Nicodemus begins the conversation. "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." Are these words the opening gambit in a chess-like debate? The honest reflections of an intrigued religious seeker? Again, we don't know.

Jesus' response to Nicodemus seems a non-sequitur. But it is direct... and provocative. Jesus says to him, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, unless you are born of the Spirit, you cannot see the kingdom of heaven."

Nicodemus is stunned, befuddled. "Reverend, what are you talking about? Re-entering the womb would be a bit of a challenge, don't you think?" But this would not be a conversation on the finer points of biology. Nicodemus had come to ask who Jesus was, but rather quickly Jesus questions him... about his birth, his identity. Nicodemus, who are you?

When someone says to us "who are you," "tell me about yourself," most of us begin with autobiographical data. "I was born in Alamosa, Colorado. My father was a minister, my mother a housewife, I have two brothers, a fabulous husband, we've just moved to LA from Chicago and are house-sitting over on Rochester until we find a place to call home. Jesus called these, things "of the flesh." We have skin and bones and came from a womb we don't remember much – we squeaked out the fact of our arrival with a wail in a time and a place that we can point to on a calendar and find on a map. That is the world of the "flesh..." the everyday "stuff of life" world – how we are coping with a brutal economy, graduations, paying our bills, getting to work, getting the kids off to school, negotiating the insecurities and fears of our relationships. The world of the "flesh" is the world we are all trying to muddle our way through as best we can. But it is also a world that pressures us with its own answers to basic questions of identity. Who are you? Where do you find meaning? In the world of the "flesh," the definers are pretty standard – bank accounts... clothing labels... job status... cars... zip codes.

The question Jesus asks Nicodemus, is the same question Jesus asks us, "who are you?" What provides you with meaning? He looked at Nicodemus and saw a life that found its identity and meaning in a set of thoroughly kept rules... world-of-the-flesh things. When he looks at your life and mine, what does he see? What or who shapes our identity... is it our family name, or the company we work for, the neighborhood we live in? And what provides meaning? The color of our skin, our political party, the security of our dwindled 401k's?

Now, the world of the flesh is very real... we are born into that world and by and large it is a pretty good one for many of us. But according to Jesus that world is not enough. And so Jesus says to Nicodemus, and to us – "you must be born again" – some would translate it "born from above." There is an alternative, another birthplace, another, more worthy kingdom. In that born-from-above-world, primary identity is rooted in the love of God and the love of neighbor. In that born again world meaning is found not in the net worth of our things or which rung we inhabit on the economic ladder. No, in that world ultimate meaning is found in a deep, intimate relationship with the God who first loved us.

Who are you Nicodemus? Who are you Lynn? Who are you? Followers of Christ are those who come through another womb... they are citizens of another kingdom – where an alternative rule, a new way of life are the order of the day. In the world of the reborn, our identity is not that of anxious consumer but of generous steward. Motivations shift from selfishness to selflessness. Behaviors have to do not with being served, but with serving. Personal comfort gives way to a commitment to collective justice. In this kingdom, kindness and compassion resist and replace the forces of greed and grandiosity... and on it goes. Two kingdoms with radically opposite ways of seeing and being. Jesus says it is this second birth that is the most critical. He says, "I tell you the truth, unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, he or she cannot enter the kingdom of God." Settle for only one birth and miss out on what God is up to... miss out on why you are here.

Well, like most people Jesus talks to in the New Testament, Nicodemus doesn't get it. A new birth, a new womb? – he'd spent 9 months there once and couldn't fathom going back. When we are so wrapped up in the flesh and blood it is difficult to imagine what Jesus speaks of. But, as usual, Jesus doesn't give up on him just because he is a bit dense. Many of us struggle with the whole notion of being born again. It conjures up images of televangelists, well-timed tug-at-the-heart-strings music and manipulated emotions designed to produce that crucial "born again" passionate moment.

Frederick Buechner has this to say about the "born again" branch of American Christianity. He writes, "From some of those who specifically refer to themselves as "Born Again Christians," you get the feeling that to them, born again means "Super Christians." They are apt to have the relentless cheerfulness of car salesmen. They tend to be a little too friendly a little too soon and the women wear more make-up than they need. You can't imagine any of them ever having had a bad moment or a lascivious thought or used a nasty word when they bumped their head getting out of the car. They speak a great deal about "the Lord" as if they have him in their hip pocket and seem to feel that it's no harder to figure out what he wants them to do than it is to look up in [Betty Crocker] how to make brownies. The whole shadow side of human existence – the suffering, the doubt, the frustration, the ambiguity – appears as absent from their view of things as litter is from the streets of Disneyland... on their lips the Born Again experience often sounds like something we can all make happen at any time we want, like fudge, if only we follow their recipe.¹

But, gracious man that he is, Buechner goes on to say that we ought not to judge their Christian experience just as we ask that our own not be judged.

True confessions – I was raised in the "born again" branch of American Christianity. What seemed most important in the church of my youth was having that one defining emotional experience that you could forever put on your spiritual resume and claim "on April 19, 1967, I was born again." Many Saturday nights, my church would squeeze a dozen or so teenagers into a couple of cars [long before seatbelt laws!] and head the 35 miles into Denver for the weekly Youth for Christ rally. In the giant Phipps Auditorium packed with young people from hundreds of other churches, we sang some songs – then a speaker shared the story of how they'd been born again. Their stories were always dramatic. Whether they'd been hooked on drugs or sex or alcohol or had been part of a street gang, each of them had a story that climaxed in that one emotion-filled moment in which they knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Jesus had saved them... they'd been born again. Inevitably the audience was asked – "have you been born again?" "Would you like to receive Jesus into your heart?" We'd bow our heads and the speaker would pray a special prayer that we were to silently repeat if we wanted to invite Jesus into our heart and be "born again."

Now, I always felt like a "born again" flop. I bowed my head and prayed that "Jesus I love you please come into my heart" prayer nearly every Saturday night hoping that this would be the night it would happen – that this would be the time I'd feel the emotion and be able to write in my Bible – "Saturday, November 15, 1971" – for all time, evidence that I had been born again." I spent most of my youth wondering when it would take – when would **I** make it into the special club? But that one dramatic emotional experience never happened... that particular line on my spiritual resume remains blank.

And yet, if you were to ask me now if I have been born again, I would say, “why yes, I believe I have.” But I have come to understand what that means in a different way than I once did. It is a different question now – and a good one: Have you been born again?

To be “born again” is not about emotional experiences – those wear off – rather, it is about the fundamental shift in our identity that happens – at whatever pace – when we get clear about whose world order we’re going to live by... the world of the flesh? Or the world of the Spirit? The kingdom of this earth? Or, the kingdom of God?

And fortunately for us, just in case we, too, are a little dense, or gun-shy about this new birth thing, the gospel writer goes on to explain just how that re-birth happens. *God loved the world so much that God gave his Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have life everlasting.* Kingdom life, whole life. What is this rebirth, birth from above? Simply, it is choosing to bet your life on the love of God. Either Jesus was a nice fellow with a few good ideas or he is the hope of the world around whom you wrap your life – with all the risks that any committed relationship entails.

IV. WHO ARE YOU?

Who are you? Hear Jesus’ words... you must be born again... you must be born from above. Let me say it again. To be “born again” is not about emotional experiences – it is about the fundamental shift in our identity that happens when we get clear about whose vision of life we’re going to live by. Who are you?

Karl Barth, one of the most important Christians thinkers of the last century was lecturing at the University of Chicago – when asked his greatest theological insight, thought for a moment and responded... “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

Who are you? The Apostle Paul when asked where his life derived meaning said... “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Who are you? Mother Teresa put it this way – “God’s cause is the only concern of my heart.”

Who are you? I’d like to close this morning Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s answer to this most important of all questions. He preached this sermon as a young preacher in 1954... “I say to you that I’m not going to put my ultimate faith in things. I’m not going to put my ultimate faith in gadgets and contrivances... I decided early to give my life to something eternal and absolute. Not to these little gods that are here today and gone tomorrow, but to God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Not in the little gods that can be with us in a few moments of prosperity, but in the God who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death and causes us to fear no evil. That’s the God. Not in the god that can give us a few Cadillac cars and Buick convertibles, as nice as they are, that are in style today and out of style three years from now, but the God who threw up the stars to bedeck the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity... I’m not going to put my ultimate faith in the little gods that can be destroyed in an atomic age, but the God who has been our help in ages past, and our hope for years to come, and our shelter in the time of storm, and our eternal home. That’s the God...”

Karl Barth, the Apostle Paul, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr. – maybe one day even Nicodemus – each of them clear about whose vision of life they would embrace. Born again. Born of the Spirit. Born from above. What about you? Was Jesus a nice fellow with a few good ideas... or is he the hope of the world around whom you wrap your life? It is the most important question we will ever answer.

Amen and amen.

ⁱ Buechner, Frederick, *Whistling in the Dark*, p. 22.