

“Born Again — And I Don’t Mean Politically”
John 3:1-17; Numbers 21:4-9

A few months ago I ran across a piece entitled: “And that’s how the fight started...” It went like this:

A husband asked his wife, “Where do you want to go for our anniversary?” He said it warmed his heart to see her face melt in sweet appreciation. “Somewhere I haven’t been in a long time!” she replied. So he suggested, “How about the kitchen?” And that’s how the fight started...

A woman walked into the den and asked, “What’s on television?” The husband replied, “Dust.” And that’s how the fight started...

One year, a husband decided to buy his mother-in-law a cemetery plot as a Christmas gift. The next year, he didn’t buy her a present. When she asked him why, he replied, “Well, you still haven’t used the gift I bought you last year!” And that’s how the fight started...

A man got home late one night and his wife demanded that he take her out someplace expensive. So, he took her to a gas station. And that’s how the fight started...

Misunderstood questions and improper responses do not just occur in our everyday lives, but also in the Bible. And we find an instance of this in our scripture for today. Nicodemus, a man of social standing and religious training, comes to inquire of Jesus. Yet, he finds himself misunderstanding what Jesus is telling him while making futile responses.

Our scripture begins with the prominent Pharisee, Nicodemus, arriving at night to visit Jesus. Now, we have done the Pharisees a great disservice by creating a historical inaccuracy defining the term “Pharisee” as a self-righteous hypocrite. In Jesus’ time, there were only about 6000 Pharisees, and they were the best and brightest of the Jewish religious establishment. Well educated and highly committed, each Pharisee signed a pledge to commit his life to the keeping of the Jewish law, an act that could only be accomplished by someone who truly wanted to do God’s will. Further, we know Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the seventy member counsel, led by the High Priest, who ruled Judaism. So, when we visualize this person who has come to see Jesus, allow your mind to see not only a well connected, powerful political figure, but someone who was highly trained and personally committed to honoring and serving the God of Israel.

Now, one of the well known elements of the gospel writer John is his use of symbolism. And, the elements of light and darkness are two of the most prominent. But this symbolism also illustrates the difficulty of biblical

interpretation. John tells us that Nicodemus came at night. Does this mean Nicodemus approached Jesus under the cover of darkness so no one would see him? Or, since the rabbis extolled night as a good time to study the scriptures, does John mention the evening in order to proclaim this was a true discussion of God's word? Or, since John typically uses darkness to denote separation from God, is he trying to tell us something about Nicodemus? We just don't know.

Well, Nicodemus begins the conversation rather diplomatically. He addresses Jesus by the respectful term, "rabbi." He calls Jesus a teacher who has come from God, and admits that one could not do the signs performed by Jesus apart from God's presence.

But remember, the New Testament was not written with chapters and verses. In fact, the original Greek contains no punctuation at all. So John wants his readers to recall the two verses before this story when he told us that Jesus did not trust those who came to belief through the signs or miracles. A faith based on miracles cannot be sustained. And now Nicodemus admits that his view of Jesus is based on the signs.

Well, Jesus' reply to Nicodemus sounds harsh and almost rude to us, but what it does is immediately focus the discussion. "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." Now the word translated "born from above" can also be rendered as "born again." The word carries both meanings simultaneously. Whereas, we have no English word that can accomplish that. But Nicodemus also makes the same mistake, translating the term in only one sense. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus says, "Listen, you have to be born of the water and spirit. The spirit is like the wind. It blows where it wills, and you hear it, but are clueless as to where it comes from or where it goes." Again, a translation side note. The Greek word, *pneuma*, is the same word translated as either wind or spirit. It carries two definitions.

Perplexed by this explanation, Nicodemus is chided by Jesus, "Are you a religious teacher, and yet you do not understand these things?"

Now, so far, we have witnessed a technique John repeatedly employs in his gospel. A misunderstanding is followed by an explanation. Then, a dialogue becomes a monologue. In verse eleven, Nicodemus fades from view and the reader gets the impression Jesus is speaking straight to us. Reminding us of the story in the Book of Numbers where the Israelites in the desert are only saved from the plague of poisonous snakes by keeping their

eyes on the bronze serpent Moses lifts high, only those who lift up the Son of Man will discover eternal life.

And Jesus concludes the lesson with the verse Martin Luther called the “gospel in miniature.” “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.”

In the September edition of Budget Travel, Erin Nathe of Carlsbad, California tells about her and her boyfriend having lunch at a really nice cafe in Athens, Greece. She writes:

Our waiter didn't speak English very well, and we speak no Greek, but the menu was in English and we were able to order. Before the meal arrived, the waiter brought us some bread and an incredible cheese spread that we couldn't stop raving about. I tried to ask if it was goat cheese, but our waiter just shook his head as if anyone should know what it was and said, “Phyllo Delphi.”

Shortly thereafter, the manager approached and asked, “You were wondering about the cheese, madam?” I said yes, and he called over our waiter, who brought the wrapper of the “local” delicacy: It was Philadelphia Cream Cheese.

The word translated “born again” or born from above has become so commonly misinterpreted in our culture that we often forget how good it is when it comes to transforming men and women.

Now, in a passage chock full of biblical teaching, I want us to note two points. First, look at Nicodemus' reply to Jesus in verse four. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter into the mother's womb and be born?”

We view this response as Nicodemus' inability to understand what Jesus means when he says a person needs to be born again or born from above. Yet, I think on another level Nicodemus is asking a question each of us raises in our own lives, just as Nicodemus may have been doing in his. Do we really believe a person can change? Do you believe you can change? To be honest most of us cannot, or rather will not, change.

For instance, I need to lose a few pounds, actually more than a few, but that's another story. And, I've needed to lose these same pounds for about thirty years. And, I know what to do to lose them. I already exercise three or four times a week. And my wife provides me with a healthy diet. But I really like sweet things. Cake, pie, candy, cookies, ice cream; I practice no discrimination whatsoever, I eat them all with

enthusiasm. The worst thing that happened to me all summer was that our crowds were so large, that by the time I arrived in the Sanctuary Atrium, the donuts were always gone.

And if I would quit eating sweets I'd probably look like Brad Pitt. Well, ok, that might be a little bit of an exaggeration. But there is no question that controlling my sweet tooth would allow me to lose weight. But I don't do it, for decades I have not changed one iota of the way I eat sugar.

Now, I believe we carry this evaluation of our inability to change ourselves onto others as well as ourselves. We believe someone who is egotistical or self centered will always be that way. Often, we retain our first impressions of a person for all the time we know the individual. Or, if we hear a less than flattering story about someone, we mentally attach it to the person as a constant source of evaluation.

And we are just as likely, if not more so, to brand ourselves. We believe that our past dictates our future, that previous miscalculations, mistakes, sins determine who we will be in the future.

On a deeper level, Nicodemus' question asked what everyone of us wants to know. Can a person change, turn around, move in a different direction? And, most importantly, can I become a different person than I am right now?

Kari Myers told this story in [The Link](#):

Early one spring I planted a couple dozen amaryllis bulbs. With great anticipation I watched for them to sprout and bloom. But weeks turned into months before the first sign of life appeared. By the end of the summer the bed of pink blooms I had imagined in my mind was nothing more than a few scatted leaves here and there.

So what did I do? Well, what would you do? I pulled them all up to make room for other things. I wasn't about to waste another season on them.

Now imagine how I felt when I looked out my window one morning a year later to see a single delicate amaryllis blossom. My surprise and delight quickly turned to dismay — for I realized I had given up on them too soon. Had I the least bit of patience or a little faith I might have had a glorious garden full of pink flowers.

Yet that single amaryllis I somehow neglected to pull, taught me a valuable lesson about giving up on things too quickly. I began to reflect on frustrating situations and

people with whom I had grown impatient. Had I given up on them too soon? I began to imagine what might happen if I applied a little diligence, mixed with some patience and faith. Might these wearisome situations and relationships flourish given more time and attention? It's a question for all of us to consider. What promises may we inherit if we diligently pursue them with faith and patience?

This morning, are we constantly uprooting opportunities for faith, for spiritual growth, for change in our lives because we just cannot bring ourselves to believe they will ever take root and grow?

Jesus answers Nicodemus' question with a Bible story. The children of Israel are wandering in the desert after their escape from Egypt. Once again they become faithless and rebellious toward God. God sends poisonous snakes as divine judgment. As they begin to be bitten and die, the people admit their sin and cry out to the Lord. God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and place it on a pole so that whoever is bitten, if they will keep their eye on the bronze serpent, they will not die. And Jesus ends the story by saying that whoever keeps his eyes on the Son of Man, on Jesus, will also live.

Like the children of Israel, each one of us is rebellious and faithless. We have refused to change, demanded to go our own way. And we have fallen into sinful ways which bring consequences that are just as deadly as a copperhead bite. And our only way out of the sin and sickness that engulfs us is to keep our eyes on Jesus.

So, yes, we can change. Yes, we can think differently and act differently. Yes, we can become new people, be born again, if we allow ourselves to also be born from above. But it is Jesus who makes this possible. Focusing on Jesus enables us to see the sin and destruction we have brought into our lives while the Holy Spirit works within us to change the direction of our everyday living. History shows that Jesus Christ can take egocentric, selfish people and transform them into advocates of love, generosity, and forgiveness. Admitting our sinfulness enables the love and forgiveness of Christ to wash us clean and literally turn us in another direction.

Jesus answers Nicodemus', and our question, directly and forcefully. Yes, people can change. You and I can change, if we will only keep our eyes on Jesus.

In his commentary on this passage, the great New Testament scholar, William Barclay, relates a story told by John Hutton about a

workman who had been a drunken reprobate and then became a Christian. His fellow workers did their best to make him feel like a fool.

“Surely,” they said to him, “you can’t believe in miracles and things like that. Surely, for instance, you don’t believe Jesus turned water into wine.”

“I don’t know,” the man answered, “whether He turned water into wine when He was in Palestine, but I do know that in my own house and home He has turned beer into furniture!”

Whether it is beer into furniture, hate into love, anger into forgiveness, selfishness into generosity, or fear into faith, history and our hearts confirm that Jesus can change us.

“Born Again — And I Don’t Mean Politically”

Sadly, the terminology of being born again has also become a political category of how to define people. And it is often not a positive designation. Some of that is because the definition most often employed looks at it from only a human viewpoint, how people interpret certain views. But in our passage, being born again always carries the accompanying idea of also being born from above. Politics don’t change us, Jesus does. Only the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, only the work of the Holy Spirit within us can make us new creatures, point us in another direction, enable us to change our thoughts, beliefs, and behavior.

This morning, have you been born again by being born from above? Do you believe, do you want, Jesus to change you?

Ludwig L. Weaver, Jr.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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