

John 3:1-17 (New International Version)

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He came to Jesus at night and said, "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."

³In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

⁴"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

⁵Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

⁹"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹²I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

This is the word of God and It can be trusted.

Thanks be to God.

There are times when life gets a little stale, boring and empty, when you do the same things over and over and over and over again. You go through the motions but that inner motivation is not there.

It happens to us in so many different aspects of our lives. Take our jobs for example. We go through the motions. In many ways, we go through parts of our jobs over and over and over again, for one year, two years, twenty years, forty years; over and over again. At one time, the job was quite exciting, but time has gone by and the inner enthusiasm isn't quite there.

Jobs can become stale. You personally, not just the job, can become stale on the job. Maybe new demands on you have created frustration at work and your enthusiasm has been squelched by frustration or lack of commendation. You either hear about the things you're not doing right or you hear nothing at all. We can become washed out, worn out, burnt out. We all know that feeling.

The same thing can happen to you at school. For those of you who are students, you know when you are going through the

motions at school, when the inner enthusiasm isn't there. You know those feelings, especially in late May or early June, during the last weeks of school. You have had the same teacher and same routine for about five to nine months depending on your school's scheduling and often the inner motivation just isn't there.

The same thing can happen in our relationships. You know when you are going through the motions. At one time, your relationship may have had a touch of excitement to it, but time has passed by and that enthusiasm is no longer there. The partnership becomes a little stale, a little repetitious. You end up being together a long time and you get into this conversation with your partner, and within two minutes into that conversation, you know where it is going. You have been there before. Or, you get into an argument, you often say, "O no, honey, not again. We have had this argument some 10,000 times. So you go through the motions of a relationship, but the inner motivation is not there.

The same thing can happen in your religious life, in your relationship with God, where you go through motions with God

again and again and again. You come on Sunday morning and you experience the same old routines and the same old prayers and the same old liturgies and the same old sermons said by the same old pastor, with the same old hymns, and you sit in the same old pew with the same old people who hold the same old bulletins. It is the same old same old, Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. And so there comes a time in one's religious life where one begins going through the motions but the inner motivation is no longer there and the inner heart is not quite alive.

It is with these images in so many aspects of our lives . . . job, school, relationship, and religion . . . that life can become repetitious, stale and boring with the same old thing over and over again, that we approach the story of Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a man who was going through the motions of religion without the inner motivation of God. But before we continue today, let us pray.

Heavenly Father:

We admit that we find ourselves at times unmotivated. Our lack of enthusiasm in our jobs, at school, in our relationships and with you is fostered by the frustrations we encounter in our day to day lives. Help us today to put aside our frustrations, to lay aside our worries and focus on you Lord; to focus on the words of Jesus to Nicodemus. As we rekindle today our enthusiasm for you, Oh Lord, may that enthusiasm spill over into all aspects of our lives that we may be motivated in all that we do and share for your Glory, not our own.

In Christ name we pray. Amen

I imagine that Nicodemus was a man in his mid fifties or mid sixties, gray haired, physically distinguished, accomplished, trim, and successful in his work. He was a teacher of the law, a professor of religion at the temple in Jerusalem. He was one of the primary teachers of the law. Now, according to the story in the Bible, he is "older in life;" that is, an older man. That means he probably had about twelve children, all gone from home. He

probably had fifty grandchildren plus ten great grand children. He probably heard that the eleventh great grandchild was to be born and he thinks to himself, "Another great grandchild? I can't keep track of all their names." Nicodemus was a man who had pretty much seen it all.

In his relationship with God, Nicodemus was a man who was going through the motions. He knew the law; he was a teacher of the law, but his inner enthusiasm for God wasn't there anymore. It was not quite right in his relationship with God anymore.

So Jesus of Nazareth showed up in town, and Nicodemus had gone to hear Jesus preach in the temple. Nicodemus sensed that Jesus had something inside of him that Nicodemus no longer had. Nicodemus was touched by Jesus' preaching and decided to talk to Jesus.

So quietly, one night, Nicodemus quietly went over to the home of Jesus about midnight, not wanting his fellow religious professors to know. About midnight, Nicodemus came to Jesus' house and knocked on the door. Jesus greeted him there.
(Knock and the door shall be opened . . .)

"I know it is late, but my name is Nicodemus. I am a professor of religious law down at the temple, and I would like to speak with you a minute."

Jesus said, "But of course; shall we go out for a walk?"

Nicodemus replied, "O no. No, no, no, no, no. We don't want to be seen outside. Do you mind if I would come in?"

Nicodemus came into the room. It may have been there that Jesus invited him up to the roof of the house where it was cooler and offered him a glass of wine. Jesus asked, "Now, what is it you wanted to talk about?"

Nicodemus said, "Things are not quite right with me. They aren't quite right inside of me. I sense that you have something that I don't have any more. I am tired. My lectures are stale. I am getting old and slow. I am interested in what advice you would have for me?"

Jesus, of course, had this uncanny ability to look right into a person's heart, and he said, "I know the problem that you are having Nicodemus. It is not that you are old; it is not that you are tired; it is not that you are worn out. The problem is this; you are

no longer close to God. You have drifted away from God. God is no longer living in the center of your heart. Nicodemus, you need to be born again.”

Nicodemus replied, “Born again? Take and push me back into my mother’s womb? Come on, now. I can’t be born again.”

Jesus said, ““You don’t understand Nicodemus. You need to be born anew, to experience a rebirth in your relationship with God. You need to be born of the Spirit; you need to be born from above. You need to experience rebirth.”

Nicodemus said, “I’m not sure if I understand.”

Jesus said, "You're not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the 'wind-hovering-over-the-water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it's not possible to enter God's Kingdom . . . So don't be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be 'born from above'—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes

from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the wind of God, the Spirit of God."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

Jesus said, "You are a respected teacher of Israel and you don't know these basics? Listen carefully. I'm speaking truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes . . . In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

Nicodemus was puzzled at this teaching. "It is time for me to go, Nicodemus said, "Thanks for the wine."

Jesus, placing a comforting hand on the shoulder of Nicodemus responded, "Before you go, please know this. This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an

accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

Nicodemus then left, closed the door behind him, looked down the street both ways to make sure that nobody was in sight and he then disappeared into the darkness of the street.

So how does this story end? Did Nicodemus become born again? Was Nicodemus born anew? Did he experience a rebirth? How does the story end? The Gospels don't exactly explain what happened to him. If this were an episode of Law and Order we would see a black background with white lettering flash before us that reads “Dick Wolf.”

Unlike Law and Order, however, we have the opportunity to go seventeen chapters forward in the Gospel of John to hear the very end of the story. The story comes from the events of Good Friday, after Jesus had been crucified. There is a story about a rich man by the name of Joseph of Arimathea and another wealthy man by the name of Nicodemus who came to prepare

Jesus' body for burial. These two older men took one hundred pounds of perfumes and spices. Can you imagine a bag of grain that weighed one hundred pounds? But this bag was filled with perfumes and spices to anoint Jesus' body for burial. The two men put Jesus' body on a table, and wrapped his body in a linen shroud, folding the spices into the linen folds. Nicodemus was there, for this most sacred ritual; the old man Nicodemus. The one who had sought out Jesus in the middle of the night under the protection of darkness to confess the staleness in his life and to seek a way to rekindle the fire he once had. He was there attending to the now dead body of Jesus, the body of the one who had taught him about rebirth.

Yes, I believe that this Good Friday story about Nicodemus reveals that Nicodemus had become a disciple of Jesus Christ. That he had been born again, born anew, born from above. Yes, Nicodemus was reborn in his relationship with God. So today on Trinity Sunday we ask ourselves what meaning this has for us. What does it mean for us to be born again? What does it mean to

be born anew? What is God's lesson for us in the Gospel story for today?

Well, far too often in life, we have drifted away from God. In our relationship with God, we are going through the motions without the inner motivation.

You can be a person who is fifteen or twenty-five or thirty-five or forty-five or fifty-five or sixty-five or seventy-five and eighty-five and you have drifted away from God. Things aren't quite right. The Nicodemuses in this room do not have to be older or more than sixty-five. Nicodemuses can be fifteen or twenty-five or thirty-five.

You start to have the habits of faith without the heart of faith. You have structures without the Spirit. You are going through the rituals but you don't have the real thing. You are going through the patterns of faith but you no longer have the power of faith.

And if you have ever come to that time in your life, when things aren't quite right, when your religion has become more of a ritual than a real thing, when it is more of a pattern than

power, when it is more structure than Spirit, we then need to come to Jesus' home, knock on his door and say, "Jesus, I need some help. I've got a problem . . . here, in my heart. Can we talk for a moment? Something is not quite right."

And Jesus will say to you, to me and to all who come to Him, "Come on in. Sit down for a while. Let's talk. And Jesus has this uncanny ability to look deeply into your heart and mine and he says, "You need to be born again, to be born anew, to be born from above, to experience a rebirth of God's love in your heart. You need to be born of the water and the Spirit.

Jesus said that there were two parts of being born again. To be born again is to be born of the water and be born of the Spirit; two parts. It is a combination of those two parts that results in being born again.

What does it mean to be born of the water?

Just as a child cannot live without water within the womb, you and I cannot live without the water of God inside of us and around us giving us life. Water, both in us and around us, gives

us life, just as water is in the unborn child and around the unborn child when that child is in the womb.

In order to be spiritually alive, you must be cleansed by the waters of God. We need to have our sin washed away daily. We are sinful by nature, we need to be constantly washed of our sin, cleansed of our sin, purified of our sin; all the time. Why all the time? By nature, we are sinful and unclean. That is just the way it is with us human beings. We are in need of the cleansing waters of God.

By nature, we are unclean. By nature, we get stressed out. By nature, we do all kinds of dumb things. And we constantly need our sinful lives washed clean with the cleansing waters of God's forgiveness. That is true of everybody here. There are no exceptions. You never grow to become so religious that you outgrow the need to be daily washed of your sins.

There is a second half to being born again. It means to be born of the Spirit. What does that mean? To be born of the Spirit?

To be born of the Spirit is not just to have a religious high, kind of like having religious champagne, becoming all spiritually bubbly inside. Tell me, what does an open bottle of champagne taste like the next day? It is flat. Yesterday's religious experiences are often flat tomorrow. Today's religious experiences, like bubbly champagne, will be flat tomorrow.

So then, what does it mean to be born of the Spirit? If it does not mean to experience religious highs like religious champagne at great campfires or great religious gatherings which last such a short time, what does it mean to be born of the Spirit? To be born of the Spirit means to have the Spirit of Jesus Christ living inside of you. It means that God's gracious love comes and lives inside of your heart.

And what is this gracious love of Christ that comes and lives in your heart? It is the Spirit of Christ coming and living in your heart. Christ's Spirit in your heart, in your mind, in our hands, in your feet, in you. It is a way of loving, a way of forgiving, a way of caring, a way of prayer, a way of worship, a way of thanksgiving and praise, a way of being in tune with the Spirit of

Jesus. It is the loving of another person for their uniqueness; no longer trying to change that person to meet my expectations but to truly love them in their individuality rather than trying to remake them into the kind of person I want them to be. Gracious love loves another person in their sinfulness. That is gracious love. That is the Spirit of Jesus.

We must be born of the water and born of the Spirit. We must experience two births; a birth of water and a birth of Spirit. That is what it means to be reborn; to be born again

If you have come to that point in your life where you are saying, "God, I am going through the motions but I don't have that inner motivation any longer. I have the patterns of religion but not the power. I have the rituals of faith but not the real thing. I have the structures but not the Spirit. If you have come to that point in your relationship with God, whether you are fifteen, twenty-five, thirty-five, fifty-five or anywhere in between, and you sensing that something is wrong with your life. Know that Jesus is waiting at home for you to knock on his door and say, "Jesus, can we talk for a moment. Things aren't right here in

my heart.” Know that if you are faithful to approach Him today, Jesus will reply, “I know. It happens to people all the time. You need to be born again. You need to experience a rebirth. You need to be born of the water and born of the Spirit.” If you are that person today then please come. Come to Jesus. Please stand as you are comfortable as together we sing page 57, Amazing Grace.