

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church
Second Sunday in Lent
March 12, 2017
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BORN FROM ABOVE

Genesis 12:1–4a
John 3:1–17

This morning, I invite us to see ourselves as Nicodemus. That is what the Gospel writer wants us to do. We know the story. Nicodemus, a teacher of Jewish thought and practice, comes to Jesus at night. It may well be that as a Jewish teacher he was afraid to approach Jesus in the daylight, fearing that he might be seen and then questioned by the Jewish authorities.

He comes to Jesus as a teacher, as one who already knows much about Jewish thought. His whole reputation as a teacher is tied up with knowing, with being certain about many things. And yet there is something in Nicodemus that tells him he has not got it all together. He is not unlike us. Who among us has it all together when it comes to matters of faith? If Nicodemus had not had a yearning for more wisdom, he would not have been curious about Jesus. But Nicodemus has a hunch that there may be something new to receive and understand. At the same time, he is conditioned to rely on what he already knows. Hence his difficulty in understanding what Jesus proceeds to disclose to him.

Yes, in so many ways, we are Nicodemus. A part of us wants to gain greater insight into the meaning of faith, but at the same time we have our pet religious understandings, our certain truths, our choice opinions, our favored prejudices. Who can deny it? If we listen to a teacher, we may want to receive something new, but we also want our positions confirmed rather than challenged. It’s only human.

Whatever motives Nicodemus had in approaching Jesus, Jesus proceeds to disarm him through the use of irony.¹ When Jesus speaks of entering the kingdom of God not by moral achievement, but by a

¹ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe*. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999) See 117–125.

transformation wrought by God, which Jesus describes as being born from above, Nicodemus hears it as being “born again,” and literalist that he is, he immediately thinks of re-entering his mother’s womb and going through the process of a second birth.

Jesus in the Gospel of John often employs what we might call a “double meaning of words.” In this story, the Greek word for “born above” can also be translated “born again.” Jesus uses the word in the first sense; Nicodemus hears it in the second sense. This is the source of the irony found in the story.

To me, it is astounding that so many Christians have taken hold of the words “born again,” as if this is what Jesus recommended. As a result, many of us (myself included) have been subjected to the question, “Are you a born-again Christian?” and when we fail to answer the question satisfactorily, we must listen to the questioner’s “born again” experience—time, place, and circumstance. This whole business of being “born again” as a litmus text of one’s faith is based upon a misreading of the text. Jesus does not invite Nicodemus to be “born again.” He asks him to be “born from above,” which is a very different matter, not a one-time matter, I might add, but something that must take place again and again and again.

“How can anyone be born after having grown old?” Nicodemus asks. “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born again?” Nicodemus, caught up in his literal, prosaic world, simply cannot enter the world of mystery and poetry. I am reminded of something Marilynne Robinson, the author of the novel *Gilead* has written:

I think there is a profound connection between poetry and theology in Western tradition. Both poetry and theology push conventional definitions and explore perceptions that might be ignored or passed off, but when they are pressed they yield much larger meanings [and] seem to be part of a much larger system of reality.²

² Marilynne Robinson, “More Than Is Dreamt of in Your Theologies,” in *The Life of Meaning*, ed. by Bob Abernethy and William Bole (New York: Seven Story Press, 2007) 31–32.

I think that is what Jesus is urging Nicodemus and us to do. He wants Nicodemus and us to open ourselves to larger meanings and enter a much larger system of reality. Jesus wants Nicodemus to leave behind his closed system of certain morality, his secured beliefs, his prosaic and literal world, and enter into a wild world of poetry and being.

Jesus is not speaking of anything like a literal second birth. He is speaking of a birth from above, a birth by water (baptism) and the Spirit, which is like the wind. “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.”

In our Lenten study this year, we are exploring a little book, *Life of the Beloved*, by Henri Nouwen. The inspiration for the book came from the friendship between Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest and teacher of the spiritual life, and Fred Bratman, a young secular Jew living in New York City. Fred Bratman asked Henri Nouwen to write something about the spiritual life that might help him and his secular friends who were searching for meaning in their lives. At first, Henri Nouwen did not want to venture into such an unknown world. He felt inadequate for the task and did not think he would have anything to say. But Fred Bratman would not take “no” for an answer. And so Henri Nouwen went about writing the little book we are discussing on Wednesday evenings. I like to think that it was the work of the Spirit that led Henri Nouwen to share his insights with Fred Bratman and those young secular urban dwellers. That’s what the Spirit does. The Spirit, if we are open to her movement, can lead us into situations that may be uncomfortable for us, but which may take us to new thresholds of faithfulness.

It’s not unlike Abraham who received a call from God to pack up and go to a country God would show him. By faith he did so, not quite knowing where he was going. That is what it’s like to be born from above, to be born of the Spirit.

The human being who is born of the Spirit, born from above, does not know exactly where he or she has come from or where he or she is going. Nothing is certain. It is not about certainty; it is about faith and believing. Faith is not sight; it is believing that there is more than meets the eye, that we dare not limit our understanding to that which can be seen and touched and proved, that there is a Spirit that seeks to work through us, a Spirit that

makes herself available to us. I say “herself” because in the Gospel of John, the Spirit that gives rise to being born from above is surely a feminine image—the work of the Spirit in us involves “birth” and nothing could be more feminine than that. Even here, Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to leave behind his old tired images of God.

So, my friends, whenever you and I think that we have got the spiritual life all figured out; whenever our faith becomes a secure possession, whenever our theology becomes prosaic and mundane, whenever our Christianity becomes conventional and established, we are on the wrong track. We have closed ourselves off to the way the Spirit seeks to work in us and through us, taking us to new births and new understandings, and yes to new beginnings.

Was there any hope for Nicodemus? Could he, a teacher of Israel, allow himself to enter into this new way of being Jesus suggested to him? Could he leave what was certain and prosaic and conventional and journey towards a new reality governed by the work of the Spirit. Could he submit to a birth from above? The good news is that Nicodemus, following his encounter with Jesus, did, it seems, embark on a path of believing and discipleship. He shows up twice more in the Gospel, once in Chapter 7 when he appeals to the Law of Moses to defend Jesus openly and publicly (this time in the daylight) to his fellow Pharisees who declare Jesus to be guilty and dangerous. Later, in Chapter 19, Nicodemus again aligns himself publicly with Jesus by joining Joseph of Arimathea in removing Jesus’s body from the cross and burying him with an enormous amount of spices.

There was hope for Nicodemus, and there’s also hope for us. Let us never get so stuck in our prosaic religious world that we miss the new thing that God through the Spirit seeks to work in us and through us. Rather, may we always be ready, again and again and again, to be born from above—to be born of water and the Spirit—the Spirit who seeks to push us along, if we are open and willing, to new understandings and to new beginnings. Yes, may it be. Amen.