

Natalie Bell
 February 18, 2018
 First Sunday of Lent

Born Again
John 3:1-17

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus^[a] 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.” 3 Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”^[b] 4 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?” 5 Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.^[c] 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You^[d] must be born from above.’^[e] 8 The wind^[f] 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.” 9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus 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^[g] do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.^[h] 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[i] 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.

Most of us are a ***lot like Nicodemus.***

He wasn’t that far removed from good church-going folks like us.

He was educated,

He was religious,

He believed in God’s law and strived to uphold it.

By most accounts Nicodemus had it all together, when it came to faith....

He was a LOT like us.

But one night, after watching this man named Jesus turn water into wine, heal the sick, and preach about the kingdom of God, Nicodemus started thinking about his life and faith, and *wondering to himself*—is this all there is? What am I missing? Am I just going through the motions with God?

He thought about all the *rag tag followers* of Jesus, the sinners and prostitutes and tax collectors that Jesus ate with... and Nicodemus wondered—
what do THEY know that I'm missing?

And so in the middle of the night—so as not to draw any attention to himself—Nicodemus went to talk to Jesus.

He starts off by acknowledging that he knows Jesus is from God, he has the presence of God in him—because of the miracles he has performed.

In response, Jesus just cuts to the chase. He tells Nicodemus that there's something special about being born....actually there's a *re-birth* far more important than any physical birth that ever takes place. *"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."*

In Greek it says without being born "*anōthen*". Which means from above. Or again. anew.

Most of us today have heard something like this before, especially here in Oklahoma, the Bible belt.

We've heard it like this: no one can enter heaven without being born again.

People may have asked you, "*Are you born again?*"

In other words, are you saved? Are you going to heaven?

Born again.

Now when we hear this kind of language some of our ears might suddenly stop up.

Does this mean tent revivals, or pushy people at my front door?

Or someone handing me a tract telling me the proper steps to heaven?

Will I be told that as a Presbyterian I am not truly saved?

Born again?

Maybe we *don't want to be born again.*

But maybe *we do.*

Especially when we realize what Jesus is saying in these verses!

*"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4 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?" 5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of **water and Spirit**. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be **born from above.**"*

I love that *Nicodemus doesn't get it.*

He's just come here to find out more about Jesus---

not to hear about what he needs in his *own life!*

But that's exactly what Jesus is talking about—for Nicodemus, and all of us.

Isn't that typical Jesus?

We read some verses for knowledge about God, and suddenly God is speaking directly to us.

This happens to me a lot!

Jesus is saying that we *all need to be born again.*

We all NEED it.

We think we have life figured out.

We think we have it all under control...but the truth is, we don't, right?

We are fallen, and broken, and sinners in need of a Savior.

I'm reminded of this as a parent.

I am fallen, and broken, and a sinner—big time.

I can hardly contain my frustration sometimes... I can do and say ridiculous things!

I'm reminded of this as a spouse—I fall so short of who I could be.

And as a pastor—my list of what I want to do is always longer than what I accomplish!

What about you?

When was the last time you realized that you too are broken?

See, we spend so much time trying to look good on the outside,
to look like we have life all under control,
when in reality *our lives are pretty broken* and messy, aren't they?

This is one reason I loved *Bob Mooney* so much.
He was so real.
And honest, and down to earth—telling it like it is.
Life is mess, and he knew it, perhaps more than most of us—having seen such
tragedy.
People are broken and he knew that too.
And that what he would tell you about his faith. He needed God. He needed us.
Amen to that!

While Nicodemus wanted to learn about Jesus....
Jesus wanted Nicodemus to take a *mirror* and look at himself.
To see the *need he had* for the kingdom of God.

Jesus said it pretty clearly to Nicodemus—
You must be born again.
You must be born from above.
By water and Spirit.

In other words,
Jesus is saying,
you need the *cleansing waters* of God's grace,
you need the *power of God's Holy Spirit* to enter the kingdom of God.

All the education and knowledge, all the control you think you have,
All that won't get you into God's kingdom...
you have to be born of *water and Spirit, born again*.

Hard words for a pious old man like Nicodemus.
He thought he had life and faith pretty well figured out...
but something in his heart knew he might be just going through the motions,
that something was missing...
It was his *heart* that led him to Jesus that night. He knew he needed Jesus!

I once read something by a great young author named Rachel Held Evans. She
writes, "*In many churches the holiest hour of the week occurs not in the sanctuary
on Sunday morning, but in the basement on Tuesday night, when a mismatched*

group of CEOs and single moms, suburbanites and homeless veterans share in the communion of strong coffee and dry pastries, and engage in the sacred act of telling one another the truth. They admit their powerlessness and dependency. They conduct searching and fearless inventories of themselves, they confess...they ask for help..they summon the courage to expose their darkness to the light: Hi. My name is Jeremy, and I'm an alcoholic." Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, pg. 66.

When asked why she is a Christian, Rachel answered
*"Because Christianity names and addresses sin... it tells the **truth** about the human condition—that we're not okay."* Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, pg. 67.

I like that.

Because you and I, ***we're not ok, are we?***

We may look like we are ok, we may hold it together really well,

We may put on a happy face, and just keep going to work and home and church....

But in reality we are fallen, broken, sinful people, in need of God's grace.

We all ***need to be born again--***

of water and Spirit....

We need God's grace to ***wash our sins***, and make us clean.

We need God's ***Spirit to fill our hearts*** and make us new.

This is what the Lenten season is all about, right?

So it is in fact a ***holy time*** when people like us can come together and ***admit*** their sins and weaknesses.

It is a holy time when we can come together

to support and encourage one another in our ***brokenness***.

Don't you think that people grow closer to one another through ***shared weakness***, much more than through shared ideas or beliefs? I do.

Isn't this why the parenting class is so meaningful?

Because parents can be real, admit their faults and find support!

It makes a difference when we admit to one another how flawed we are,

It brings us together when we let our guard down and just get real with each other.

But this is not always what happens in church, is it?
 Most of us are like Nicodemus,
 people who at least on the outside seem to have the answers,
 people who seem to have life under control.

And there in lies the problem.

I like what Rev. Kenneth Carder says, *From my own experience across the years, it is much easier for those languishing in prison or those who are addicted or those prodigals who find themselves waking up in a pigpen in a far country to understand what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus than it is for those of us who have reduced life to what we can control. It's **easier for them** to believe in being born anew from above than we who think we have it all together.* [Seeing, Believing and the New Birth from Above.](#) Kenneth L. Carder, Faith and Leadership, 2012.

You know, one of the most powerful things we do as a church each week is the unison ***prayer of confession***, and that moment of silent confession. It's a reminder that we are broken, sinful people—who need Jesus Christ. It's a reminder that church is a place where brokenness is ***accepted***, and we are all here because we really need God.

If we don't know how much we need God, what are we doing?
 If we don't acknowledge how much we need God,
 we can all too easily become like a ***country club*** of people
 who seem to look good and be good,
 and have it all together
 and believe the same things...

But in reality the body of Christ is a bunch of ***broken pieces***
 that God puts together.

Years ago during Lent we took ***mosaic tile pieces*** and during worship
 we made that cross that hangs in the back of the sanctuary.

And we heard each week about God using our brokenness
 and putting the messed up pieces of our lives all together—
 something broken into something beautiful.

This lent we are taking beads, little bits of wood and glass, and stringing them
 together to remind us to pray for our brokenness—all the people and situations
 around us.

Reminds me of the ***Apostle Paul*** in Acts 9,

A man who thought he had it all together, a powerful Jewish leader who took it upon himself to persecute Christians.
He thought he had his life together, but in reality he was a mess:

It is on that road to *Damascus* that *Saul* actually realizes what a terror he has become, when he's blinded by the light of Christ... and only after his conversion experience does he become Paul, an apostle *for Jesus* Christ.

He had to acknowledge his own faults, his sins, his failures. And then, and only then, was he able to be made new. We could definitely say he was *born again*. Born from above—by water and Spirit.

So what about you and I?

Can we *admit* that our lives aren't perfect?
That we might need to be born again?

Isn't it a relief really—to think about just being real?
right alongside our real brothers and sisters in Christ?

Isn't it interesting that some of the *most beautiful verses* are found right after Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus?
Some of the most powerful words in all the Bible.
John 3:16-17.

Let me read it to you from Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translation:
6 "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.
17 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.

Now that's the gospel my friends.
The really *good news*.

That God so loved the world that he sent his only son—for us to have new and eternal life. God didn't come to condemn, but to save us.

And we sure need saving.

Which brings me to another good point about being born again.
Do you remember your *first* birth? When you entered the world?
Did you do to cause that to happen?

Because Jesus is saying, you *can't, and don't*,
do anything to earn your re-birth either.
It's a *gift* of the Holy Spirit.

All you need to do is know that you need it, and receive it.
New life in the kingdom of God, is a gift of *God's grace*,
and we receive it merely by accepting it through Jesus Christ.
We *receive* this new birth.
We don't earn it.

In fact, we aren't in control of it at all.
Jesus told Nicodemus, "*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.*"

Being born again means accepting Christ's love.
It means *receiving* the love that comes from the Spirit of God.

And when we do, we are *renewed-- again and again*,
For hopefully, the wind of God's Spirit blows
through our hearts and minds,
again and again,
throughout our lives.

The problem is that many times we try to do this *on our own*.
This is the way Nicodemus was—he was a Pharisee, a legalist, someone who
earned his standing with God.
We fall into the same trap—trying to earn our way to being a better person....
But that's not the way we Christians work.

Someone once asked a young Christian,
“What is the *difference* between my religion and yours?”
She responded, “They are actually quite close.

In fact, only two letters separate our beliefs.
Your religion is spelled, 'D-O; DO.'
Mine is spelled: 'D-O-N-E; DONE.'"

The work of our salvation has *already been done* on the cross of Jesus Christ.
He has already been lifted up.
We were saved by Jesus over 2000 years ago.
We just have to accept that grace, and *surrender---*
surrender our lives to living like Him.
We let go and let God work on us.
We allow Christ to change us, to make us, to mold us into the people we were
created to be.

The great author Max Lucado has a book entitled, *Just Like Jesus*.
The theme of the book is simple.
God loves us just the way we are.
And God *loves us too much* to let us stay just the way we are.
God wants us to be just like Jesus.

When we accept God's grace, we are born again.
We are changed, *transformed*, and set on a path to be like Jesus.
All by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Friends, believe the Good News of the Gospel
God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son,
And sent us his Holy Spirit that we might be *born again*. Amen.