

March 8, 2020
“Born and Born Again . . . ”
John 3:1-12
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story: Once upon a time, there was a woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. First she read everything she could get her hands on—history, philosophy, psychology, religion. While she became a very smart person, nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for. She found other smart people and asked them about the meaning of life, but while their discussions were long and lively, no two of them agreed on the same thing and still she had no answer.

Finally she put all her belongings in storage and set off in search of the meaning of life. She went to South America. She went to India. Everywhere she went, people told her they did not know the meaning of life, but they had heard of a man who did, only they were not sure where he lived. She asked about him in every country on earth until finally, deep in the Himalayas, someone told her how to reach his house—a tiny little hut perched on the side of a mountain just below the tree line.

She climbed and climbed to reach his front door. When she finally got there, with knuckles so cold they hardly worked, she knocked.

"Yes?" said the kind-looking old man who opened it. She thought she would die of happiness.

"I have come halfway around the world to ask you one question," she said, gasping for breath. "What is the meaning of life?"

"Please come in and have some tea," the old man said.

"No," she said. "I mean, no thank you. I didn't come all this way for tea. I came for an answer. Won't you tell me, please, what is the meaning of life?"

"We shall have tea," the old man said, so she gave up and came inside. While he was brewing the tea she caught her breath and began telling him about all the books she had read, all the people she had met, all the places she had been. The old man listened

(which was just as well, since his visitor did not leave any room for him to reply), and as she talked he placed a fragile tea cup in her hand. Then he began to pour the tea.

She was so busy talking that she didn't notice when the tea cup was full, so the old man just kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides of the cup and spilled to the floor in a steaming waterfall.

"What are you doing?!" she yelled when the tea burned her hand. "It's full, can't you see that? Stop! There's no more room!"

"Just so," the old man said to her. "You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There is no more room in your cup. Come back when it is empty and then we will talk."

There is no tea, and there's not even a leading question when Nicodemus—the Pharisee, the teacher of the law, a leader of the Jews—comes to Jesus. But it's clear that he's looking for answers. And it also becomes clear that this is not the usual exchange we see throughout the gospels between Jesus and teachers of the law.

Typically, of course, they approach Jesus in very public spaces, in broad daylight, with questions meant to test him.

John 8, in the temple, with a crowd of people gathered around Jesus: "The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to (Jesus), 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say? They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge against him.'"

Or Mark 10 and Matthew 19, again with crowds gathered around him: "Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife (for any cause)?"

Or Mark 8, "The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him."

Or Mark 11: "As (Jesus) was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes and the elders came to him and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you authority to do them?'"

Or Matthew 22: "When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees (another Jewish sect), they gathered together, "and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?'" We know where Jesus goes with that one (Love God, love your neighbor as yourself).

I could go on, but I won't. This is a thing—there is a way in which these interactions usually go down. But Nicodemus' interaction is different from the start.

We're told that he comes to Jesus "by night." No public spaces. No crowds. No one at all. Nicodemus does not want to be seen—by his fellow teachers of the law, by the religious and political authorities more generally (note that Jesus, as the narrative flows, has—just before this—turned over the money changers' tables in the temple). Nicodemus is not looking to draw attention to his meeting with Jesus.

He opens with a compliment, what we know his colleagues often did as part of their set up—but again, this is no set up: "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." You get the feeling that a question's coming next, not a testing question but a genuinely curious question. But Jesus skips right to the lesson before Nicodemus can get to it.

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kin-dom of God without being born from above." Note here the contrast with the second Genesis creation story of humankind being formed "from the dust of the ground." *Ha-adam* from *ha-adama*. Created from above, created from below. Created from heaven, created from earth. Created from spirit, created from flesh.

" . . . no one can see the kin-dom of God without being born from above." The Greek word, *anōthen*, can also be translated, born "anew" or, yes, born "again."

And at this Nicodemus, clearly taking Jesus literally and clearly missing the point, asks: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the

mother's womb and be born?" Oh the dangers of literalism! But we can appreciate Nicodemus' earnestness. He sounds like someone just trying to understand.

Jesus goes on: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter (this time enter, not see) . . . no one can enter the kin-dom of God without being born of water and Spirit."

And back we go to Genesis: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God—*ruach Elohim*—swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness (God) called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day."

This, of course, from the first verses of Genesis. The Hebrew word *ruach*, translated as breath or spirit or wind. Wind and water and light. The elements of creation. Of life itself.

"What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the spirit is spirit," Jesus continues. "The wind (here the Greek word *pneuma*, like *ruach*, meaning wind or spirit) 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 (*Pneumatos*)."

Born of the Spirit. Born from above. Born anew. Born again.

"How can these things be?" is Nicodemus' response. And so we leave him in a state of confusion. Unable to grasp the mystery.

How can these things be? We won't take time this morning to break into groups of two or three to discuss, as we sometimes do at Calvary, but I invite you to consider these questions anyway: What does it mean to you to be born of the spirit? Why do you think Jesus says you can't see or enter the kin-dom without being born of the Spirit? Or born from above? Anew? Again?

I've gotten in the habit, since I started in this role as interim pastor, of titling my sermons. It's not something I've really done much before whenever I've guest preached somewhere, or even when I was preaching more regularly with students at Drexel, but I've been doing it the past couple of months.

As you see in the bulletin, I titled this sermon, “Born and Born Again . . . “ Pointing to an understanding of Jesus’ concept of being born of the Spirit, or born from above, or born anew or born again, not as a singular, linear event or experience (as many self-proclaimed “born-again Christians” seem to suggest), but as an ongoing process of renewal. Of recreation. Of making room in our fragile tea cups.

As Paul Simon describes in his song, *Senorita with a Necklace of Tears*, “We are born and born again, like waves on the sea.” Rebirth, renewal, re-creation is a fluid and progressive and elemental process for us and for the world around us. Wind, water, light. Spirit.

I might’ve also titled this sermon, “Back to Basics” or something like that, because in the invitation to be born of the Spirit, I hear an invitation to return—again and again and again—to our spiritual centers. As we considered last week, to return to the divine truth of who and whose we are. To return to the divine essence of our created and creative selves—our divine purpose—made by Love for love. It is so simple, really, but it’s also so easy to lose our way. You know this. I know this. It’s so easy to get pulled, as we also considered last week, off our centers, away from our essential, elemental belovedness. To give into other voices (internal and external), to pay heed—by choice or by default—to other gods. To become too weighed down by the brokenness of the world, or our own pain and brokenness, to bother.

And so the invitation to be born again and again and again and again is the invitation—and yes, the requirement if we are to truly see and experience even glimpses of a kin-dom marked by love—to return to that belovedness.

When we are born we leave the darkness and comfort of the womb and enter, in all of our vulnerability, into the light of the world. We cannot experience newness, new life, rebirth in the Spirit, without first coming into the light and risking such vulnerability.

The author of John’s gospel plays with a running theme and metaphor of light and darkness, begun in the first chapter—“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it”—and continued throughout the gospel.

Jesus goes on to say, following this encounter with Nicodemus, and just beyond our reading this morning, “. . . that the light has come into the world, and people loved

darkness rather than light . . . But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." In Love.

And so we circle back to the confused, cautious, but curious and intentional Nicodemus, who came to Jesus in the dark, literally and figuratively, but came to him just the same. The implied questions before Nicodemus are also before us: Will you continue in darkness or will you come into the light? Will you continue in legalism or will you come into love? Will you continue in death or will you come into life?

Nicodemus does not appear in any of the other gospels but does show up twice more in John's gospel. The second time places him in the middle of another confrontation involving Jesus and the Pharisees. In this case, they're wondering why the temple police have not arrested Jesus, as they had previously sent them to do. But it's Nicodemus who, kind of, sort of, in his own way, stands up in Jesus' defense. Chapter 7, verses 50-51: "Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, 'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?'"

It's not a lot, but it's something. Speaking truth, in his own way, to power. Nicodemus has found some courage. Nicodemus has stepped further into the light, literally, figuratively, spiritually.

The third and final time we see Nicodemus is after Jesus has been crucified, at his burial. Chapter 19. Along with Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus (and a "secret" one at that, we're told, because of his own fear of the religious authorities), Nicodemus appears, unexpectedly, to help prepare Jesus' body for burial. Verse 39: "Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came (which is to say, by day), bringing a mix of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds." And the two together wrapped Jesus' body and laid it in the tomb.

Little by little, Nicodemus has found his courage and come further into the light.

Friends, we can only see and experience and enter into the kin-dom of God, the kin-dom of love, by coming further into the light and risking the vulnerability that love requires. By making room in our fragile tea cups for life-giving love, which is—in case you're still

wondering—the meaning of life. By claiming and reclaiming, by turning and returning to our divine identities, our divine purpose, our divine essence as God's beloved. Made by Love, for love.

May we be born anew into that elemental love. May we be born again and again and again and again and again into that love—love for ourselves, for each other, for the earth itself. Like waves on the sea.

And may it be so.