

Message: "Open-Ended Faith"

Scripture: John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus 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." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴Nicodemus 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?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The 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." ⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

It is no secret that pastors do a lot of visitations with people of all sorts and situations and circumstances; most of the time pastoral visitations are moments of casual conversation mixed in with deeper sharing dependent upon what's going on in the life of the one being visited. Faith is often talked about, of course, but perhaps not as much as the personal details of challenges and struggles people face as a result of their faith - or sometimes in spite of their faith. One thing is clear in my experiences of pastoral visitation - you never really know what's going to be the real topic of conversation until the words flow.

I remember an experience in my distant past when serving a church in another state; I was visited by a parishioner who was, in his words, "struggling with his faith." We met about three or four times at the church whereupon he shared his questions about God and faith, his inner struggle with relationship stresses, and his tendency towards depression because nobody seemed to understand him. This is all fairly normal pastoral counseling subject matter. In all those conversations, however, he made some sort of comment that he wasn't ready to tell me everything, which is fine; victims of trauma or painful histories or those wounded by religion often need a significant amount of interaction before they feel comfortable enough to share darknesses of the past. But then there came the meeting when he said, "I think when we meet next time I will tell you the heart of my struggles." I sensed progress and was hopeful another pastoral

conversation might help him to share what was weighing him down, so as to seek some release from his spiritual heaviness.

The days leading up to our meeting had me doing what all pastors do - thinking about what kind of trauma was afflicting this soul. We pastors are trained to a certain degree to work with the traumas of things like physical abuse, sexual abuse, family estrangement, identity discernment, childhood trauma, and social disorientation along with more theological/faith-connected issues such as forgiveness, redemption, confession, sanctification, justification, and everything from meaning of life to the meaning of death. It's not at all that we have the answers - but that we perhaps have enough awareness of the issues to engage in rational, heartfelt conversation that people find helpful.

Well, the appointment came, and it began with the usual pleasantries. About ten minutes in, he stopped the conversation and made an announcement. He said, "I'm ready to tell you my secret." I put on my counseling seat-belt and discernment-enhancing goggles, bracing my ears to hear of major trauma. That's when he took out of his pocket a fist-sized ball of steel wool. "This," he said, "is going to change the world."

He went on to explain that he had made a revolutionary discovery - that if you pack steel wool into a car engine's carburetor, you automatically increase the gas mileage by around 90 percent. He went on from that secret to another, where he disclosed that he had discovered a hidden energy portal or tunnel that can be accessed around Des Moines, Iowa that will transport people to various dimensions. He made yet another "secret" known to me, which involved his ability to channel energies of the universe through carefully-placed mobiles of the planets which he'd like to use our church's fellowship hall for (it seems he couldn't find a large enough space for the display).

I did not see these things coming. I was not expecting these disclosures. I was speechless. I didn't know what to say for a few moments, at least. To be honest, I'm not sure exactly what I said in response, trying at once to reassure this person that his struggles were real, but that they likely had nothing to do with steel wool or energy portals or planetary mobiles. Let's just say our conversations from that point on were focused on his mental health, which was a real concern.

This kind of thing happens to all of us at one time or another (and no, I don't mean talk of steel wool or planetary mobiles!) - in our normal flow of life, every now and then we happen upon a conversation that goes completely off the rails.

That's what's happening in our passage where Nicodemus is meeting with Jesus. It all starts out innocently enough; after all, it probably wasn't that strange for two persons of faith to meet to talk about religion. But then again, maybe because of the preceding reputation of Jesus, meeting with him was a risky thing to do. That they met alone and at night might speak to this risk. And maybe this helps to explain the cautionary opening Nicodemus uses for their conversation - "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." It's almost as if Nicodemus was buttering Jesus up for a warm-hearted, mutually-pleasant interaction. In any event, it seems obvious that Nicodemus wanted to enter this conversation gently; Jesus, however, had other ideas.

Before Nicodemus could even ask a question, Jesus lets him have it. In order to sense the dazzling array of statements from Jesus towards Nicodemus, I attempted to put his words in more contemporary language.

"To see God, you must be renewed."

"Heaven can only be seen by those whom God helps to see."

"The Spirit is an uncontrollable wind to get caught up in."

"What comes down must go up."

"What Moses did with snakes, God is going to do with me."

"God wants everyone to experience eternity."

"God wants to save the entire world."

"Can't you see this? How dumb can you be?"

It's no wonder Nicodemus only manages to ask really just one question: "How can these things be?" He was flabbergasted; he was made unsteady; he did not expect these responses. But please notice what he did not do - he did not protest by defending present understandings; he remained open to the unexpected answers Jesus gave, regardless of his present understandings.

How we need the disposition of Nicodemus today! A willingness to remain open to God's unexpectedness or unconventionality is in short supply these days as we see regularly in the headlines many people trying to place God in a box of their own design. Forcing answers about God and God's will for political gain or justification of war or vilification of difference or national pre-eminence are all molds created by humans to shape God in our own image. But God is a mold-breaker by nature; what is not of God cannot substitute for God, not here and now, and certainly not in eternity. This should be obvious, but it's obviously not

when we see such flagrant misuse of the Gospel everywhere. We should know better; we should know that when we try to put a period behind the mystery of God, the one thing we can be sure of is that it is not God we're talking about anymore.

We see this tendency to box God in right here in this passage. It contains one of the most recognized faith understandings in the Christian world; all I need to do is say "John 3:16" and I bet most people can quote that verse from heart - "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." If the theological essence of the Gospel could ever be reduced to a bumper-sticker statement, this would be it. It is perhaps the most used phrase for banner-waving Christians at football games, evangelists at revival meetings, and Christian propaganda promoting church attendance.

It is also one of the most abused passages of the Bible when it is used to promote the understanding that faith's only purpose is to get a person into heaven.

Such understandings are appealing for those who seek the easiest, simplest, most direct route to eternal life, but such understandings are contrary to Jesus's own priorities for life with God. And that is the main point Jesus makes throughout his ministry with us - that the point of faith has as much to do with the living here and now as it has to do with any conception of eternity. What we do here and now matters; how we live, how we love, how we work, how we pray, how we conduct our affairs daily matters to God, as these things should matter to us. And it all begins with something mentioned early in this passage - being born again - which, by the way, is something Jesus never said.

At least he never said it as we use that phrase today. Jesus says, after Nicodemus greets him with a compliment, that "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus protests that physical rebirth is impossible, whereupon Jesus says ""Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." "Water and the Spirit" was a phrase commonly used to denote baptism, which was and is a sacrament denoting one's acceptance of life as God's gift to be lived according to God's will. It has nothing to do with a key that unlocks heaven for the recipient; it has everything to do with an actual re-orientation of life towards God.

It is here that we have arrived with Nicodemus at the heart of the matter for Jesus - that faith involves the ongoing re-orientation of life towards God. "Being born again" or "Being born anew" or "Being born from above" or "Being born of water and the Spirit" are different ways of saying this. "Ongoing" is the keyword here (say it with me). Birth as a metaphor is helpful as it is brought into these understandings of something new **regularly and repeatedly** coming into life, something coming into view more clearly, something being brought into our actual living that makes that living more complete. A great mistake is made when we limit this kind of birth as one-time occurrences. The sacrament of baptism may be a one-time thing, but the practice of baptism - the realignment of ourselves with God - should be something that happens regularly and repeatedly.

Regularly and repeatedly aligning ourselves with God; regularly and repeatedly letting God come into our lives - these are excellent ways to understand faith, aren't they? Regularly and repeatedly letting God come into our lives by following Jesus, by reading scripture and praying and worshipping, by bringing to life the unconditional love at the heart of God's being, by practicing the disorienting yet life-giving power of forgiveness and self-sacrifice and graciousness towards others. And isn't it true that regularly and repeatedly doing these things is a good way to describe the practice of love - regularly and repeatedly sharing life with another? With God? With others? Isn't it true that God is love? That all of these are ways to practice life with God?

Faith arises when authentic curiosity is moved to question God, not in order to test God or to defend ourselves, but in order to understand God through relationship. Faith arises when we realize God is not on the docket, but we are, placed there that we might be taught how to learn about God. And it is only God as teacher who can help us know what needs to be learned in the first place.

Bishop John Shelby Spong once said, "The problem with literalized truth is that it kills the search for meaning." I think that's a good way to understand what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus; I think that's a good way to understand what Jesus is saying to us today. Let us always resist our tendency to put a period where God is still speaking - and realize that God is always speaking.