

This morning we begin a preaching series that will focus on encounters between Jesus and several real people. We'll look at his encounter with a blind man, a paralyzed man, a sinful woman, a broken disciple, and today, a good, religious man. Many of us know a good bit about Jesus- the facts of his birth, ministry, death, and resurrection, but do we really know him? My hope is that as we look at the interaction between Jesus and these folks, we'll get to know Jesus, the person, a little better, and that we will end up saying to ourselves, "I want to encounter Jesus where I live! I want to know him better."

This morning we focus on Jesus and Nicodemus. In John 3, we find the story of their first encounter.

*1 Now there was a Pharisee named **Nicodemus**, a leader of the **Jews**.*

*2 He 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**." (John 1:1,2)*

From this short introduction, we learn several things about Nicodemus. First, he was a Pharisee, a popular Jewish religious group of that day. Being a Pharisee meant that Nicodemus was extremely religious, having taken a pledge to keep the entire Old Testament law. He would have been steeped in the teachings of the scriptures, and would have taught them to others. Pharisees believed that keeping the law (which was

God's great gift to the Jewish people) was how you demonstrated that you loved God, and how you made yourself acceptable to God.

But Nicodemus was no ordinary Pharisee; he was "a leader of the Jews," meaning that he served on the Jewish governing body called the Sandhedrin, an elite group of 70 men who oversaw religious and civic matters for the whole nation. Nicodemus was a national leader.

And he was sympathetic to Jesus. He calls him "Rabbi," a title of respect. And, he says that he knows that Jesus' work and ministry is from God. Apparently, he wanted to get to know Jesus more, so he sought him out for a one-on-one conversation... at night. So you know what that means- He was the original "Nick-at-Nite!" Some people think he came at night because he didn't want to be seen by others. Others think he just wanted some uninterrupted time with Jesus. But he came. Now listen to Jesus' odd response to Nicodemus:

3 *Jesus answered him, "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."*

Where did that come from? Nicodemus, an important, very religious person has come to Jesus, and complemented him on his ministry. Jesus' response is to tell him that no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again or born from above. (The Greek phrase can be translated either way.) Keep in mind that we don't have the full conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. We have a summary here, which may explain why Jesus' response sounds so abrupt. But what Jesus says here is crucial to every one of us. Let's try and figure out what he meant in his response to Nicodemus and why he said it.

First, what did Jesus mean by the phrase "Kingdom of God?" He tells Nicodemus that no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he/she is born again. Jesus talked frequently about the kingdom or reign of God. He referred to it in the Lord's Prayer which we prayed earlier in the service. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The kingdom of God takes place wherever God's will is being done. Where the poor are cared for. Where people forgive one another instead of holding grudges. Where God's laws about sexuality are obeyed. Where commitments are kept. Where peace reigns instead of conflict. That's what heaven is like, because God's will is done there! And, according to Jesus, the Kingdom of God is coming to earth. So Jesus tells Nicodemus that if he wants to see the kingdom of God, he needs to be reborn!

By saying this, he was subtly undercutting Nicodemus' whole belief system. Here is a guy whose whole life is devoted to keeping all of God's laws in excruciating detail. Jesus implies that isn't enough. Nicodemus is digging in the wrong place! None of us has the inner power to be the kind of person God wants us to be. Outwardly conforming to the law is good, but God needs our hearts, our attitudes, our minds, and our souls to be transformed if we are to be fit for the Kingdom of God. To do that, we need to be spiritually reborn.

Des Oatridge was working in Papua New Guinea, translating the Bible into a native language there. When he came to this phrase "born again" in John's gospel, he asked his native co-translator to think of a good way to express it so people would understand what it meant. The co-worker explained a local custom. He said, "Sometimes a person goes wrong and will not listen to anybody. We all get together in the village and place that person in the midst of us. The elders talk to him for a long time. 'You have gone wrong!' they say. 'All your thoughts, intentions, and values are wrong. Now you have to become a baby again and start to re-learn everything right.'" Today the words of John 3:3 in that language (Binumarien) read, "No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he becomes like a baby again and re-learns everything from God's word." That's what it means to be born again.

Interestingly, when we hear the words “born again” today, we tend to think about someone who has fallen very far from God’s grace- a drug dealer, an adulterer, a perpetual liar, a thief, or a murderer. Or, someone like Chuck Colson, the convicted Watergate felon, who died this week, who entitled his autobiography, Born Again. It makes sense to us that people like that need to be born again. But Nicodemus wasn’t like that. He was more like...many of us! He was a good citizen. He gave 10% of his income to support the poor. He served on synagogue committees. He did his civic duty. He studied the Scripture and worked hard to understand its meaning. Nicodemus would have made a very good Presbyterian! But Jesus tells him that he needs to be born again. We’ll come back to that.

In Anne Tyler’s novel, Saint Maybe, 19 year-old Ian tells his parents of his decision to leave college and become an apprentice cabinetmaker so he can help his sister-in-law raise the young children of his deceased brother, Danny. Ian has arrived at this decision because of the influence of Rev. Emmett and the Church of the Second Chance.” When Ian tells his parents about his life-changing decision and the role that his renewed faith and church have played in this decision, they have some concerns.

“Ian, have you fallen into the hands of some sect?” his father asked.

“No, I haven’t,” Ian said. “I have merely discovered a church that makes sense to me, the same as Dober Street Presbyterian Church makes sense to you and mom.”

“Dober Street didn’t ask us to abandon our educations,” his mother told him. “Of course we have nothing against religion; we raised all of you children to be Christians. But our church never asked us to abandon our entire way of life.”

“Well, maybe it should have,” Ian said.

Unlike the Church of the Second Chance, many of our mainline churches have lost the ability to call people to radical good and to help them do it! We tend to simply reinforce the prevailing values of our culture without much question.

And that’s where Jesus’ words to Nicodemus speak to us. Like Nicodemus, many of us are pretty good people, living conventional lives where religion may even play a significant role. It brings us comfort and helps us feel good about ourselves. Jesus is telling us that isn’t enough. To be the kind of people who are part of God’s kingdom, we need to be spiritually reborn. We need to re-learn everything. Instead of just reflecting the values of the larger culture, our values, our wants, our attitudes, and our practices all need radical overhaul. We need to be spiritually reborn.

That’s what Jesus means when he says “that which is born of flesh is flesh.” You can’t will yourself into being a godly, Christ-like person. The work of God’s Spirit is required. And, thank God, the Spirit is willing to do that work in our hearts and remake us into the spiritually-alive people God wants us to be.

But, how does that work? Listen to John's reflections on the encounter with Nicodemus a few verses later.

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. (John 3:16,17)*

The key word for us in the first verse is "believe." The Greek word is "pistieuo." It doesn't just mean to intellectually assent to something. "Yeah, I believe that Jesus is God's Son." No- it means to trust in, to rely on, to commit yourself to something. In what do you trust when you are making the host of decisions you make each day about how you will spend your time, what you will do and not do, how you will spend your money? Do you trust in your own reason to make those decisions? Do you trust in your gut feelings? Do you trust in the advice of others, or act so that you'll gain the approval of others? Or, do you trust in the words and values of Jesus Christ to guide you? When you begin to trust in Jesus and his words, you begin to experience the new life God has for you. You are born again.

By the way, it appears that's exactly what happened to Nicodemus. His encounter with Jesus changed him. The next time we see him, he is defending Jesus against his critics. The last time we see him, he is

working with Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus' body for burial following the crucifixion.

Our Session is reading a book by Anthony Robinson called Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations. It talks about the serious challenges facing mainline churches like us today. The third chapter is entitled, "A New Heart." In it, Robinson talks about the need for many mainline churches to move beyond preaching an anemic civic religion, instead challenging people to a vibrant, personal faith in Jesus Christ. I think he is right on target.

I believe that is what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus and what he is saying to us. If you want to be part of the Kingdom of God, you need to be born again- to trust in Jesus Christ to make you right with God and to transform your attitudes, beliefs, feelings, heart, and soul. Have you invited God to begin that transformation in your life? Would you like to do that? If so, take the next few moments of prayer to ask God to come into your life and re-make it. Then, you may want to talk with me or Lou or one of our elders to learn more about following Jesus.