

Sermon Title: **Born from above**

John 3:1-17

ALL: Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.²He came to Jesus by night and said to him,

Nicodemus: “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.”

Jesus: “Very truly, I tell you, *no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*”

Nicodemus: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus: “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.”

Nicodemus: “How can these things be?”

Jesus: “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 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 Humanity. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Humanity be lifted up,¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶For God so loved the world that God gave the only Begotten 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.”

Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

And so Nicodemus, a leader in his community, he comes seeking Jesus in the night. He comes seeking the light of the world in the darkness of night, he comes to have greater understanding, he comes because things that he has been taught – some of the things that he has believed to be most important, some of the things he has dedicated his life to as a Pharisee – they are not quite lining up with what is happening in and through Jesus – so he comes trying to align these seemingly incongruent views. He comes because of something gnawing at him – we would probably call that the Spirit of God. He comes seeking an Epiphany, an encounter with the Divine.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, John tells us, “a leader in his community.” He is perhaps a lawyer, or a teacher, or a political leader of some kind – he is known in his community – he is a person of some power, of some privilege, someone who is benefiting from how things currently are – someone who is benefiting from the status quo. We as people of means, people of some power and privilege, we are meant to relate to Nicodemus.

And so he comes seeking Jesus in the night, and Jesus tells him: *no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above*. To this man of means and power, to this man who has given his life to living by each religious instruction passed onto him by his Sunday School teacher and grandparents, Jesus says, You’ve got to start over. You have to be reborn. You have to be born from above. You have to become vulnerable once again. You have to

become dependent once again. You have to move beyond your social position, your achievements, your wealth, your reputation. You have to let go of all the things that make you self-sufficient and alienate you from the wonder of the gift of God – you have to move beyond the things that make you believe that you can earn God’s love and mercy with the purest of lives. The way you are living, Jesus is saying, is cutting you off from the things of God. Jesus says this to Nicodemus, he says this to us,

No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above

And we, like Nicodemus before us, we ask, “How can these things be? How can we be born a second time? How can we be reborn from above?”

In the mystery of God there are many ways that we might be reborn, that we might see once again, that we might be renewed once more. Let me offer a few ways that I think, we perhaps, might be born from above for our time and our place – a few ways we might see a bit more how God would have us see.

1) First is to remember what you have hopefully heard me say a few times before, that “the whole of the gospel is that God is simply in love with you, everything else is just commentary.”¹

And so to see rightly, we have to first see how much we are loved. Our Dominican brother Herbert McCabe says that we have come to see God primarily as a judge, in our inability to

¹ Herbert McCabe offers this line in his sermon on the Prodigal Son.

believe that the Creator of the world is simply in love with us, we have “changed God into a projection of our guilt, so that we don't see the real God at all; all we see is some kind of judge.”²

Just as a child needs more than milk and a clean diaper to properly grow and develop, a child must be held and loved, they must know they are secure and safe. In fact, we know that children who are not held, they will not grow and develop properly – children have actually died from not being held. We too must know that our Heavenly Parent is in love with us, this is the only way we can develop properly as people of faith – this is how we can begin to be born from above. So if we have forgotten this about ourselves, if we have forgotten this about God, we must be reborn to the truth that God is simply in love with us.

To this teacher of the law, Jesus says, you must be reborn from this way you have been living in which you believe you can earn God's love by being the best – that you can earn your salvation – in the mystery of God, the Creator of the Cosmos is simply in love with you. This is what Jesus tells Nicodemus, this is what Jesus tells us.

2) This love of God which we speak of, it is not just some generalized concept of love, it is the concrete fleshy love that comes in the person of Jesus of Nazareth³. It is in this person that God's love is revealed. And so as followers of Christ, to know this type of love we must explore Jesus-shaped ways of knowing. And so in a Jesus-shaped way of knowing, how did Jesus come to see from above? How did Jesus learn to see from above?

² Herbert McCabe, in *Faith Within Reason*, p.155-6.

³ Stanley Hauerwas in *Unleashing Scripture*.

In the unpredictable way of Jesus, he came to see from above by dwelling with those from below – those who were not at the top of the social or political hierarchy. I almost hate to say this, because in my life time it has almost become cliché to say that Jesus spent time with the most vulnerable and marginalized in his society. Jesus came to see how God sees, at least in part, by dwelling with “those with their backs against the wall”⁴ – not just by handing them a bag of food, not by assuming he knows what their lives are all about – Jesus comes to see how God sees by having his perception of reality shaped by spending time with the poor, the uneducated, the sex-workers, the Samaritans, the unemployed.

When I was in my second semester of college, I was first introduced to this idea that the kingdom of God, it comes not from the top-down, but from the bottom-up. I thought this sounded great, but I had no idea what it meant. I knew it had something to do with an *Upside-Down kingdom*, since that is the name of the book we were studying, but I didn’t know what that meant, that the kingdom was coming from the “bottom-up”, I didn’t know what it meant that those at the edges and bottom of our social hierarchy were the ones to teach us about the love of God – about what God was doing in Jesus.

And so, Jesus says to Nicodemus, to this man of prominence and stature and wealth, he says, You are in **the worst position to see** the kingdom of God – you have a retirement plan, you have power, you have earthly security – you are in the worst position to understand that you are dependent upon God – you have the worst point of view to see what God is doing in the world. And so you must readjust your view, you must be born from above: you must spend time with those who see differently – you must listen to what they have to say about their lives and you

⁴ Howard Thurman uses this phrase in *Jesus and the Disinherited* to describe the situation of Jesus’ own life, as well as the situation of Black Americans of his time.

must believe what they are telling you. You must spend time with those who don't see from your position of wealth and privilege but who see from the side and from below; you must readjust your position, not by trying to stand with those on the top, but by standing with those with their backs against the wall.

I had a rebirth experience in this way a couple of years ago at Corpus Christi House (Boise's day shelter for homeless citizens). This came after I had been spending time there a couple of years, well after the time I stood up here to preach sermons about relationships and loving people who are different than ourselves, after writing articles about hospitality and accepting people on their own terms. Someone came into Corpus with a new flavor of Mt. Dew, and I asked them, about their Blue Mt. Dew – is it good? A good flavor I should try? I was just being friendly and making conversation. Well, they offered me a drink, they offered me a bit of hospitality. I said, “No, no, I don't want to take any of your Mt. Dew. I was just curious about it.” And they insisted, I should try it, it was okay – they were happy to share.

Well, in the moment I had to ask myself, did I truly believe that we were equals? Did I truly believe in hospitality, which means giving and receiving. If one of you were to offer me a drink, I would of course accept it. So, would I accept this offer, this gift? Did I believe that this person had as much to teach me about God as I had to offer them? I needed to be reborn.

How do we see from above? How can we be reborn? By spending real time with those who see the world from different social locations from ourselves – not seeing them as problems to be fixed, not by seeing them as those people with deficits, but by dwelling with them – by valuing them, by assuming that they have much to teach us – by coming to know people as

individual creations, not as “types.” This is what Jesus tells Nicodemus, this is what Jesus tells us.

3) Finally, how might we be born from above – how might we see a bit more clearly, the kingdom of God. This last way of seeing differently is a way that I am needing to be reborn – I am feeling worn down, I am feeling saddened, I can feel it deep within me. It is a way of being reborn I was alerted to this week in listening to Nadia Bolz-Weber speak a few times at a conference this week.

This way of seeing from above is for any of you who have said, at some point this past year, “I can hardly stand to listen to the news – I have to take a break from the news because it is so hard to hear, so hard to watch, so hard to process and comprehend.” So for all of us who feel or have felt overwhelmed by seeing only pain, only fear, only evil, only acts of hatred, only acts of terror – let us try to see a bit differently for a moment.

Of course God sees all these terrible and heart-breaking things and more – God weeps with us and for us. But God also sees the thousands of beautiful and uplifting things that most of us never see – God sees the thousand acts of love that are done for each act of terror and hatred. Nadia alerted us to this through the story of the “Good Samaritan”, pointing out that in this story there are only a few verses given to the act of violence – only a few verses for the robbers, but the Good Samaritan gets paragraphs, the act of loving kindness gets the bulk of the story.

So to help us be think differently for a few moments, I am going to ask everyone to take the paper from under your chair and *write down each act of love and kindness and beauty that you*

saw this week; that you did, or saw, or just heard about. Take a few moments to do this – Chad will play a bit of music for us, and we will write about the love and beauty we have seen and experienced this past week. We will remember together that for every act of terror and hatred, there are thousands of acts of love and kindness and beauty. We do not hear about most of them, they do not make the headlines, but they are happening all the time.

Time for writing

How are we born from above? **By remembering that evil does not have the final word.** By remembering that while pain and fear and hatred are alive – the God who is deeply in love with you is the same God who Created the Cosmos, and in the mystery of God, love will win. Love has evil outnumbered. People of love have people of hatred outnumbered. The nightly news might not tell us this, but as people of faith we remember this.

“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.” Amen and amen.

Sending Blessing

*And now as you go from this place, may the God of hope go with you:
empowering you to remember that the God who Created the Cosmos is simply in love with you;
empowering you to remember that love has evil outnumbered;*

empowering your to remember that God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved

– may we remember this –

that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.

Go in peace.

Amen.