

Sermon Title: *A life of conversion*

John 3:1-10

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?’

Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and **let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,** ²**looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,** who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

A religious leader, a teacher by the name of Nicodemus, comes to Jesus in the night. He sees there is something to the message Jesus is speaking, to the acts Jesus is performing. He sees God in Jesus' words, he feels God in Jesus' presence, he recognizes God in Jesus' care and love for others. And yet, he comes in the night, perhaps not wanting to risk his position and stature in the community – not ready to leave all he has and follow Jesus – not ready for that type of commitment, but wanting to know a bit more. Wanting to hear more. Wanting to experience a bit more.

Nicodemus has given his life to understanding and teaching the religious laws. He has put the law on a pedestal, we might say he has made it his idol. It has made sense to him. It has established clear 'dos' and 'don'ts', it has made clear for him what God requires of him. And now comes this traveling preacher, in whom he sees God working and moving in a new way.

My Bib Lit professor, Marion Bontrager, used to speak about our life of faith in this way: like a Venn diagram of tradition, experience, and scripture – where these pieces meet, makes up our understanding of God and what we are called to do in light of that understanding.

Catholic teacher and author Richard Rohr, speaks of our life of faith a bit differently, he speaks of it as a tricycle moving forward – and that first wheel, that larger wheel, is experience. With tradition and scripture as the back two wheels. Rohr believes that it is more our experience that leads us forward into new encounters with God, new understandings of God. And we check these new encounters with the supporting wheels of our tradition (which would include our community of faith), and scripture: is a new understanding of God or self in-line with the God

we meet in Jesus Christ? Is it in-line with the values of our tradition? Rohr says that historically, those of his tradition, Catholicism, have an oversized 'tradition' wheel – in search for a final authority to answer all questions and give final and certain direction, tradition was the wheel of importance.

And for us who come out of the Protestant stream of the Reformation in our traditions, we have had an oversized wheel of Scripture, that we too were looking for a final authority to answer all our questions and end all discussions – in that place, we put the Bible. [I really tried, but I couldn't find a 'Google Image' picture of a tricycle with one back wheel that was larger than the other two. So, you will have to use your imagination of a tricycle with a Giant rear wheel and consider where that riding that might take us.]

We all have one of these areas that we likely more emphasize than the others, one wheel that perhaps dwarfs the rest. In the Anabaptist/Mennonite view, it is likely community that has been our oversized wheel – the seeking of forming a pure and holy community; the seeking of a community living in harmony together: we have made this an idol. I think technically that would fall into the 'tradition' wheel of our categories – this tradition has sought authority not from a Pope or a hierarchical structure, but through community. This too can become an idol, and often has. It is the seeking of perfect community that have caused hundreds and hundreds of churches to split and splinter off, as they continue in search of the idol of perfect community.

Nicodemus, as a teacher of the law – as a Pharisee – I think it is likely that his wheel of tradition is over-sized; the wheel of tradition has been leading him in his life of faith. But then he meets

Jesus, and he has this different experience of God – he is seeing God move in a way outside of these carefully crafted traditions that have given his life purpose, meaning, and structure – that has given him clarity for what to do in each situation. Perhaps for the first time, he is encountering God, which is messing with his categories. And so he goes, seeking Jesus in the night.

Of course, Jesus does not ask small tweaks of the lives of those that are seeking to follow him: to Peter, Andrew; James & John – he said, leave your nets, and come and follow me. To the Rich Young Ruler who we met in last weeks story he said, “sell all you have, give it to the poor, and then come and follow me.” Zacchaeus gives half of all his wealth to the poor. And to Nicodemus, Jesus says, you must be reborn.

Jesus doesn't say, “well, you are a little heavy on the rules” or “your view of community is a little oversized.” He says, you must be reborn. He doesn't say, “you need to fix one of those wheels on your tricycle” but, “Nicodemus, you have to get a whole new tricycle.”

“You must be born from above” or “born again”, depending on your translation. This particular story gave rise to the idea in Western Christianity of “being born again” – a phrase that we often still use. Of course, traditionally, this idea of being born again has meant a moment of conversion – one moment in time when we died to ourselves and we reborn in God. And my guess is that we have a variety of gut reactions happening right now, as I mention the concept of ‘being born again’ – some positive, perhaps some of you recalling a particular moment of time

when gave your life to God or made a new commitment toward following God and away from something else. And perhaps some have reactions closer to nausea, perhaps memories of feeling coerced, or guilted into a particular decision; or this phrase might conjure up associations with a version of Christianity that is only concerned with personal salvation and a particular political agenda.

Whatever our gut reactions, I think “being born again” can be a helpful concept, though, in my experience, I have needed more than one conversion experience. I am not talking when I was a kid at camp and was so terrified that I asked Jesus into my heart every night for months. Nor am I talking about salvation implications – I am not talking about the old debate of “once saved always saved”? I am talking about the ways that, as we ride our tricycles through life, we continue to meet God in new ways – we continue to meet God in ways that challenge us, that interrupt our categories – that make us question our priorities. And then, when God reveals something new to us, for the second or twelfth or two-hundred thirty-second time, we must be born again. Sometimes we are unaware of our need for rebirth, but then God shows up.

When I went to seminary, it was in part a quest to answer my questions around prayer and ultimately, my question of if God was still working in the world. I thought that perhaps, if I didn't think God was active in the world, then maybe I shouldn't be a pastor. This was part of my quest in going to seminary – my front wheel of experience with God was quite small – I went to seminary to see if I could find a one. This is the rebirth I was seeking – maybe not in the best place – seeking an experiential answer in a dry academic setting.

But in the midst of my time in seminary, I was reborn in a way that I didn't even know I needed. When I was interning in San Francisco for a summer, I got to know Claire who was a community organizer in Oakland, largely working around home foreclosures. A woman who was giving her life toward working for change, toward organizing for change. And in a discussion her and I were having, I made an off-handed comment about, seminaries being fully of cynics. And she stopped me, and said, "shouldn't seminaries be full of hope – shouldn't they be full of people who believe that change is possible."

And that was the beginning of my rebirth of hope. But I still wasn't too sure. I liked my cynical self, and it protected me in many ways. If I didn't really think anything too much could change, than I didn't have to risk much. If I mostly remained the critic, standing on the sidelines to point out where things could have gone better, or how a better phrase could have been chosen there – I was safe.

And then Jenna and I were driving back to San Francisco after a road trip, and I was subjecting Jenna to listening to a bunch of MLK sermons and speeches with me. And I remember the moment of conversion distinctly, we were getting close to Oakland and I stopped the sermon, and said, "he actually believes this is possible", "he actually believes that this can happen – that this will happen."

And then I knew that I had to be reborn. That I must be reborn into hope. That I must be about proclaiming the God who makes a way when there is no way. That, even if I am not so sure every day, part of my key role up here is to regularly speak about hope. To help us be formed as a community of hope. If I cannot utter hope, than I don't think I am a lot of God to us as a community, because we can find cynicism all around us. Because out there, outside of these

walls, we are surrounded by, “it is what it is.” But in here, as a follower of Christ, I want to proclaim that “it will not always be what it is.”

And so, that was my rebirth to hope – a story some of you have heard before.

And my guess is that we are all in need of a rebirth in some area of our lives – that we need to be reborn once again, in a particular part of our lives. Like me, it might need to be a rebirth of hope. It might be to forgiveness; it might be to compassion; it might be to releasing control; it might be a rebirth toward seeking God in prayer and reflection; it might be a rebirth toward seeking God in ‘the other’...

It might be a rebirth that you are seeking, or, it might be that God is showing up in an unexpected way interrupting your well-ordered life and categories.

This is what we might call “a life of conversion”, where continue to seek to be formed as God’s people, whatever our age or stage of life, where we continue to seek our own healing, so that we can more fully vessels of God’s healing; where we continue to seek to building ourselves in hope, so that we can be vessels of God’s hope. And this is not something that only happens once in our lives, it is something which happens again and again. As we keep riding our tricycles forward, we keep encountering the Living God – asking us to see a bit more fully from above. May we be a people of continued conversion, a people of continued rebirth to the God of love. Amen.