

SERMON – February 15, 2008 – NICODEMUS ENCOUNTER – HOW DO WE GROW INTO SOMETHING RADICALLY NEW

I can vividly remember standing on my porch in the small town of Windham, New York with a self-appointed group from the pentecostal church at the other end of town. Shaking their bibles at me, they wanted to know if I was a “born again Christian”. I tried to engage them in a conversation about my experience and understanding of what it meant to be a Christian and that my growth in faith had come gradually and was continually being renewed as I grew in maturity. After essentially saying, Is that your final answer? the buzzer went off and that was totally unacceptable to them. I hadn’t passed their litmus test as a true Christian. I’ve got to say – I was really pissed off – Here I was, the pastor of Windham and Ashland United Methodist Churches and these folks had the nerve to judge the quality of my faith experience as inadequate

I want to begin by acknowledging that I think it's unfortunate that we in the mainline denominations have tended to let our more conservative Christian brothers and sisters have a near monopoly on the language of "born again." I think there are a number of reasons that we have done that. The language might be a bit hot and heavy for us, perhaps. And most of us have known at least one person who was born again in a singularly unattractive way. From your laughter I can tell you know exactly what I mean. When the born again experience leads to an even greater sense of self-righteousness or judgmentalism, it's not the born again experience, or there's an awful lot of static in it. Moreover, sometimes being born again is very narrowly defined in some Christian circles as if it's the same as receiving the gift of the Spirit, particularly the gift of tongues. Or it's defined even more narrowly, yet, in the left-behind novels that have been on the *New York Times* bestseller list of the last several years, those novels about the rapture and the second coming. In one of those novels that I've read, believing in the rapture and the imminent second coming of Jesus is defined as the meaning of being born again.

But it is a much broader notion, a much more comprehensive notion than any of these narrow meanings. It is, as I've already said, at the very center of the Christian life, and I think we need to reclaim it. And so, in my sermon today I'm going to speak about its centrality, its meaning, and its application to our lives.

That is what is often done with this story of Nicodemus. For some circles of contemporary Christians the litmus test of true Christianity is whether one proclaims that they are “born again”. That flattens the meaning of this encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus to a one dimensional diatribe. If any thing, the Gospel of John is never one dimensional and certainly, what we know of Jesus – he never treated any encounter as either a one

dimensional or one sided – his encounters genuinely engaged the other in dialogue. The narrative dynamic involves the reader to an active process of reading and interpreting as the reader is drawn into the conversations Jesus has with Gospel characters.

The point of the story is that Jesus is trying to engage and then move Nicodemus to a new understanding – a radically different orientation from where he currently sits – in the modern language of change – Jesus is a new paradigm – Nicodemus is trying to understand him through old religious lenses. What do I mean by that?

Nicodemus comes with genuine curiosity – he knows Jesus is of God, because he has seen the signs – witnessed the miracles, the healings, the extraordinary and therefore, from his perspective he's ready to hear more. The dynamics are that he comes at night because he's not quite ready to sign on and he doesn't want to be seen as a follower quite yet – it would be dangerous. He was cautiously putting his feet in the water and it was no small thing –

Dynamics of Danger for Johanne Community.

For the American Slaves, Nicodemus was a model and a hero. They heard this story as the as the proof that it was possible to come to Jesus even when those in power forbade it. So they would worship in secret at night. But that's an aside.

The bottom line of what Jesus (and John) was trying to teach was that Jesus was about a new understanding of who God was. Nicodemus understood God as sheer power and Jesus was shifting the paradigm to understanding God as Self- giving love and relationship. This whole dialogue about being born of Water and Spirit was talking about Relational Change.

Where I want to take us today is to talk about the dynamic of moving into new orientations – how this story can prompt us to think about how entering into real dialogue is hard work but it is the way that we come to fundamental change.

Today I'm going to speak about the personal transformation that lies at the very center of the Christian life, and I am going to speak about that by talking about being born again – that means letting the Source back into ourselves.

It begins with Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night, and already we have the first symbolic touch. Nicodemus is in the dark. And darkness and light are central images in John's Gospel. The Christian life is about coming in out of the dark and becoming enlightened. And Nicodemus addresses Jesus in flattering, but, I think, sincere terms. He says, "We know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one could do the signs that you do unless he were from God." Jesus responds in such a way as to suggest it's not about signs, it's not about miracles, it's about being born again. Specifically, Jesus responds by saying, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above."

Now it is Nicodemus' turn again. He doesn't get it, and he asks, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into one's mother's womb and be born again?"

The silliness of the dialogue – Last Summer I read, “When Plato and a Platypus walked into a Bar” – the authors used “jokes” to explain philosophical terms. Well, one preacher this week has pulled out the Abbott and Costello routine “Who’s on First” to get behind what this dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus was about. They were talking two different languages at once. If we take it into a modern terminology in some ways it’s the collision of Left brain legal scholar and Jesus is persistent in his “right brain” Heart vocabulary.

Nicodemus takes Jesus' words literally. Nicodemus is a literalist. He was trying to image climbing back into the womb and starting all over again. That was Nicodemus' problem – he was so tied as a Pharisee is worshipping the written word – studying – judging everything by the word of law – residing totally in his head and thinking his way to God. He kept God “out there” when what Jesus yearned for him was the ability to be touched by God personally and to be in touch with the one who “So Loved Him, that he went all out to draw Nicodemus and us back to that Embracing, Enfolding love – a God who didn’t just give signs and wonders, but draws us into that powerful loving space of the spirit . As John adds,
” God who so loves us that he gave his only Begotten Son”

For Jesus, it was about a radical life shift – it was about being “born again” meaning returning to the source/ connecting again with the one who Made Us – God/ the Divine/ - but it isn’t about thinking our way back there alone. It’s about a re-connection that comes from the spirit. For the gospel writer of

John it was about “dying to the old, and “living into a new life”. In a way, John's Gospel as a whole, not just the Nicodemus text [focuses on this theme], but one verse crystallizes it from the 12th chapter. It is the well-known verse where the Jesus of John says, "Unless a grain of wheat is cast into the earth and dies, it will not bear much fruit." We are told he is referring to his death and resurrection.

This path of death and resurrection is also what the journey of Lent is about. Lent is about participating in that final journey of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. This path of death and resurrection, of dying and rising, is what being born again means. What does this mean in terms of its application to our lives? Somewhat abstractly, it means dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being. It means dying to an old identity and being born into a new identity--an identity in the Spirit, in Christ, in God.

Why do we need to be born again? I think we all do for two somewhat closely related reasons. The first of these reasons is because of something that happens to us very early in life, perhaps in the stage of infancy and certainly in the pre-verbal stage by the time we are toddlers. It's that emerging awareness of the distinction between the self and the world. If you have very good parenting, perhaps it takes a while for that awareness to emerge, because the world seems like an extension of yourself. You get hungry; you get fed. You get wet; you get changed. You get lonely and cry; you get picked up. But at some point, that awareness of the distinction between one's self and the world emerges, and with the birth of self-consciousness--self-awareness--the natural result is that one becomes anxious about the self. One becomes concerned about the self, focused on the self.

I think this is in a way one of the central meanings of the Garden of Eden story, the story of the fall. **We begin our lives in paradise as it were, with a sense of undifferentiated union with what is life in the presence of God--life in the garden of delights--and the birth of self-consciousness begins our existence east of Eden.** This is something we all go through.

The second reason is because of the result of growing up. By the time we are adolescents, perhaps earlier, our sense of who we are--our sense of identity--is the produce of our socialization, the product of our culture, the product of all those cultural messages we get while we're growing up. We feel okay or not okay about ourselves to the extent that we measure up to all of those

messages that we've gotten. Our identity is grounded in that. Thus, we fall further into the world of separation, alienation, comparison, judgment of self, and of others. We identify ourselves with what the contemporary Benedictine spiritual author, trainer and contemplative prayer Thomas Keating calls the false self--that self that is a reflection of culture; that self whose identity is grounded in being a certain kind of way.

Now – What I'm not saying about reminding us of this journey into self-consciousness is that we stop the process of maturity and just live a "childlike faith" – I'm not there at all. What I am speaking of is that we recognize that our call as disciples is receive the invitation to hear again a call to a fundamental love that draws us back to the source.

Story of the Three Year Old and new born brother

The whole process of being born again is about dying to that false self and being reborn into our authentic self. Being born again involves dying to that identity that has gotten molded by ambition and expectations and fears, dying to that way of being, and born into an identity centered in God, Christ, the Spirit. This experience can be sudden and dramatic. It is for some people. Some people can name the day or the week or the month in which they felt a radical change in their lives occur in relationship to God. But for the majority of us, I suspect, it is a more gradual and incremental process, a process that goes on throughout a lifetime--perhaps a process that occurs several times in a lifetime in periods of major transition. Indeed, it is even sometimes a daily rhythm in that daily remembering of God or reminding ourselves of the reality of God that can raise us up momentarily out of our self-preoccupation and burdensome confinement.

There's nothing terribly mysterious about spirituality. Spirituality is paying attention to our relationship with God. Spirituality is about becoming intentional about this process of being born again. You can't make it happen, but you can be more open to the blowing of the Spirit, to the wind that moves where it will by being intentional about the process.

That is what the session of Lent is about, about being born again, about following the path of death and resurrection, about participating in Jesus' final journey. To become somewhat more concrete as I move toward the final part of my sermon, some of us may need to die to specific things in our lives--perhaps to a behavior that has become destructive or dysfunctional,

perhaps to a relationship that has ended or gone bad, perhaps to an unresolved grief or to a stage in our life that it is time to leave, perhaps to our self-preoccupation, or even to a deadness in our lives. (You can die to deadness.) It is possible to leave the land of the dead. So, the journey of Lent is about being born again--about dying and rising, about mortality and transformation.

We're on the journey. This is the theme I've chosen for this season out of the Gospel readings that lead us up to the cross and beyond. Last week, Wally shared the thoughts I had about the preparation and the packing for this journey. I've chosen three characters: Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and The Man born Blind to help us think about how we encounter Jesus as the one who will draw us back to the authentic – to a way of living that holds our heads, our hearts, and our bodies into a oneness with our God. To encounter what Jesus had to teach them and teaches us. In the midst of those personal encounters we will also meet the world head on as we hear from our Youth next Sunday after their 30 hour fast to raise money and consciousness about famine and radical hunger in the world.

Today, I ask you to think about how Nicodemus is a part of your life. Have you kept God at a distance. Has there been too much crowding out the possibilities of Love transforming your life?

The journey of Lent is about being born again by participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus, about that journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. The journey of Lent with its climax in Good Friday and Easter, is about embarking on the way of Jesus on that path of mortality and transformation that is at the very center of the Christian life. When you think of it, who of us does not yearn for this? Who of us does not yearn for a fuller connection to life? Who does not yearn for an identity that releases us from anxiety and self-preoccupation? To be born again, it seems to me, corresponds to our deepest yearning. May we this Lent experience that internal transformation that is at the center of the Christian life. May we experience being born again.

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Contrast the Dialogue Project. Listening Deeply

Cross- Cultural/ Cross Racial/ Cross Religious

Where are you stuck?

Where does it take us? If we can stay with it, to a new place and a new peace. If we can stay with it to experience the Kin-dom of God. Did you hear me? I didn't say Kingdom – I said Kin-dom of God. For that paradigm shift is for us to enter into hearing what will come with entering the relationship and dialogue.

