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John 3:1-17

*The Question*

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John 3:1-17 The Message
“There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we all know you’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren’t in on it.” Jesus said, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to God’s kingdom.” “How can anyone,” said Nicodemus, “be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from-above’ talk?” Jesus said, “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit. “So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it’s headed next. That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’ by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.” Nicodemus asked, “What do you mean by this? How does this happen?” Jesus said, “You’re a respected teacher of Israel and you don’t know these basics? Listen carefully. I’m speaking sober truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes. There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don’t believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can’t see, the things of God? “No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life. “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person’s failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.”

 The season of Lent is not what most of us expect from our church. We come to worship to be uplifted, to hear words of grace and assurance, to get a spiritual shot in the arm so we can make it another week. But here in Lent, we sing serious and somber hymns. We confess a lot. The word “Alleluia” does not form on our lips. For some of us, the whole season of Lent can be very uncomfortable and a bit unpleasant. Worship may even feel a little draining at times, a little heavy, a little too honest. We live in a culture driven by worshipping success, seeking power, and meeting our own needs no matter who else gets hurt. The season of Lent takes us in the opposite direction.

 We spend this time of Lent confessing our sin—the ways in which our relationships with God, ourselves and each other are wrecked and broken. We begin the season focusing on our own mortality, our own impending death. We speak about temptation and our own complicity with the powers and principalities of this world. And while all of that may not make us feel good, it makes us feel. It makes us think. It makes us reexamine who we really are—not who we hope others think we are--and who we are called to become as God’s children.

 Let us hear a story from the Gospel of John 3:1-17 about someone else who is examining their life. From The Message translation: There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we all know you’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren’t in on it.” Jesus said, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to God’s kingdom.” “How can anyone,” said Nicodemus, “be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from-above’ talk?” Jesus said, “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit. “So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it’s headed next. That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’ by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.” Nicodemus asked, “What do you mean by this? How does this happen?” Jesus said, “You’re a respected teacher of Israel and you don’t know these basics? Listen carefully. I’m speaking sober truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes. There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don’t believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can’t see, the things of God? “No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life. “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person’s failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him. (John 3:1-17)

Nicodemus knew very little beyond what he had heard about Jesus or perhaps seen from the crowd. Yet Jesus did not expect him to have all the answers. Nicodemus was spiritually enriched because he was willing to ask questions and to learn. It feels like we who seek a deeper knowledge of God have little to contribute. Yet God continues to meet each of us where we are and blesses our risky efforts to grow in faith and the knowledge of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

 Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of darkness - 'a ruler of the Jews' - a member of the Sanhedrin which, in most domestic matters, the Romans allowed to operate as both a civil and religious governing body. Its 70 members were presided over by the High Priest. Nicodemus was not only a member of this council, he was also a Pharisee - a member of one of the stricter sects in Judaism. In many ways the Pharisees were the best people in the whole country. There were never more than 6,000 of them; but they were known as a brotherhood.

 'Pharisee' has come to have a bad connotation to most Christians, which is unfortunate because it distorts our understanding. Even Jesus calls them the 'blind leaders of the blind' and likens them to 'white-washed tombs full of the rottenness of dead men's bones'. But they were the responsible, respectable, decent people of their time. They were as solid and devout a group of people as one could find. The Apostle Paul proudly lived and died a Pharisee. (Philippians 3:5; Acts 26:5). Nicodemus was a pillar of the Establishment. He was expected to set a good example.

 Nicodemus’ friends and associates heard about Jesus and had serious questions concerning this new teacher. Nicodemus had questions, too.

 To the Jewish establishment Jesus must have looked like a potential troublemaker. He was a Galilean who had come to the Holy City of Jerusalem, roughly the equivalent in our day of being a kid from east Texas that moves to New York City. Jesus had a popular following and the power structure felt threatened.

 Nicodemus was impressed by the miraculous signs that were a part of Jesus' ministry. Jesus, like all of us, is first known and judged by his actions, not his ideas. Nicodemus had the courage and an open mind to seek Jesus out.

 Nicodemus begins his conversation with a complimentary remark in a gentlemanly fashion, confirming Jesus' authenticity. Jesus interrupts him sounding almost abrupt responding with a statement guaranteed to start a conversation. He points out to Nicodemus that what really matters is that a person must be 'born anew' or 'from above', or that person cannot enter the Kingdom of God.

Nicodemus doesn't catch the metaphor. He takes the words literally and asks puzzlingly how someone could be born a second time.

 So Jesus tried again and said one has to be born of water and the Spirit. Nicodemus, as a teacher in Israel, should not have found the idea of rebirth strange. When a man from another faith became a Jew through prayer, sacrifice and baptism, he was regarded as being 'reborn'. Jews knew the idea of rebirth.

 But Nicodemus didn't get it and the whole scene finally dissolves setting the stage for what the Reformer Martin Luther called the Gospel in miniature, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life."

 If we are really interested in what Jesus is doing, the first thing to realize is that we have to start all over again. We can't inch our way into the Kingdom of God by tinkering a little bit here or a little bit there with our self. It isn't just a matter of being a little more disciplined, or giving a little more to the Church or praying a little more often. It's a whole different way of life. It was the same message Jesus had for the rich young ruler, “sell all that you have", completely change your outlook on and orientation toward life.

 Today, some of us need to made a clean break with our past. The rich young ruler needed to make a clean break with his success. Some of us need to make a clean break with our guilt and failure. Some people, maybe Nicodemus was one, need to make a clean break with their religious ideas. Some people need to make a clean break with their goals. Some people need to make a clean break with their companions. Being in the Kingdom of God means making a clean break with anything and everything which interferes with our obedience to God.

 The love of God has a way of redeeming lives long after they seem to have been lost, we can receive new life from above, a fresh start, a new direction. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement at 35 years of age was a dejected and rejected ex-missionary whose preaching turned people off more often than it turned them on. Then one night at a Moravian prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, the Holy Spirit broke through the life of this broken Anglican pastor who felt for the first time that "God had forgiven my sins, even mine."

 I close with a story of an old Army man who for more than 35 years had been a heavy drinker with a chip on his shoulder. He spoke before a group of doctors. He said he'd had a personality change and now he was as temperate as he had once been intemperate, as considerate as he had once been severe, as concerned for others as he had once been selfish. In the audience was a psychiatrist of the school which says that personalities are set very early and who protested that at his age you can't have a personality change. "Well," replied this member of Alcoholics Anonymous, "at least I am under new management."

 That is the answer of Jesus to those who say that the drunk cannot become sober, that the self-centered must always be that way, that the cruel cannot become kind. It is possible to come under new management, to 'be born anew' and when we do life has a quality it never had before.