

Again...

Alydia Smith

Minister of Christian Development and Community Life

Bloor Street United Church

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Reading:

John 3.1 – 15

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' 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?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The 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 said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

'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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, our lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

As some of you know, I am a learning junkie. I am involved in a few learning circles for Dmin Candidates at Emmanuel. One of the candidates asked us to identify bible stories that spoke to our holistic faith; how we wish to live out our lives and embody the Christian story. I listed numerous stories that I always return to: Elijah

and the prophets of Baal, The woman at the Well, The Last Supper, of course the prophet Isaiah, who said “Here I am Lord, send me”, but whom we often forget asked “How long, O Lord?” a mere three verses later. In the list, to my surprise, I included the story of Nicodemus.

You see, before I knew of Mary and Martha, Timothy, Judas, John or Paul, before I knew of Lydia even, I knew of Nicodemus. Because of my grandmother, Miss Sercy, a beautiful, faithful, Baptist wife of a deacon, who was always singing a hymn and who died about 20 years ago. The hymn I always remember her singing the most was a Sankey hymn about Nicodemus, “*O Nicodemus, he was a ruler, and a ruler of my soul, the massa’ tel’em say, he a’fe born again, and tru*” I have no idea what the rest of the song said (because I usually was getting in trouble by then). I always wondered what could have been so special about this Nicodemus guy that my grandmother would sing out his name as much as she sang out the name of Jesus. (And the name of Jesus sounded sweet to my grandmother’s ear). There must be more to Nicodemus ...

Many scholars see Nicodemus as a simple tool, used to get at the three point sermon that Jesus delivers in this text, something in me disagrees. We know too much about Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which was a well respected sect of Judaism; he was a powerful religious leader of the Jewish people, and a man of wealth. (We know this because he had enough money to provide 100 pounds of myrrh and aloe for Jesus’ burial.) We also know that he believes that there is something special about Jesus. So much so that he went to learn from Jesus one night at the very start of Jesus’ public ministry.

Nicodemus is welcomed into the place where Jesus was staying, I am sure to the chagrin of the disciples. Nicodemus politely says to Jesus: “*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’ response is sermon point 1: “*you need to be born ‘anothem’ to enter into the commonwealth of God*”. This is a bit of a play on words in Greek; the author is trying to tell us something. The word ‘anothem’ in Greek can mean both, ‘from above’ and ‘again/ renew’.

Nicodemus responds with: “*How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?*” Usually it is assumed that Nicodemus either didn’t quite get what Jesus was saying and took it literally or that he was being a bit of a twit, because being born again was a common expression, even then. It is also possible that Nicodemus is asking a legitimate question; we say it, or are afraid to say it, all the time, but *what does that actually mean to you Jesus, to be born again?* What does that feel like, because I feel the same? *What does that actually mean to us mainline liberal protestant folk to be born again?* Jesus concurs that it

is obviously more than the things that we can understand with our taste, touch and smell – our flesh; some things are spiritual says Jesus, some things are mystery – and these are the things that you need help in understanding, if you are to understand what it is to be born again and born from above (or from the spirit).

So to help in our understanding of these mysteries, Jesus moves on to sermon point 2: *“Very truly, I tell you no one can enter the kingdom of heaven without being born of the spirit and water.”* However, Jesus continues, *“the 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.”* The spirit does not enter us solely on the day of our baptism; we are not just born again/or from above once. The spirit is free, it doesn't follow any doctrines or laws; it comes to us over and over, again and again. When we are on the mountain top, and when we are in the valley. Within the mystery and relationship of the Trinity, the spirit is the one that is hardest to quantify or qualify – it is hard to testify to. But it is, and it is with us.

Barbara Lundbland, a professor at Union Theological Seminary, once stated that *“Though we cannot see the Spirit, we can see where the Spirit has been”*. For some, this is easier than others but it is nonetheless true.

I have heard many people talk about how they felt the spirit move through them during the 32nd General Council, in 1988 when we approved the *Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality* report which stated that *“all persons, regardless of orientation, who professed faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to him, were welcomed to be and become full members of the United Church”*. I have heard stories of people who came in ready to vote against the report, but the work of the spirit helped them to listen to others and to see the scripture and the situation ‘anew’. Were they born again of the spirit?

This is not something that we often talk about in United Church circles, and it is not language that we often use. The modern day connotations of being born again/ from above are difficult for many of us because it sounds too ‘religious’ and it often eludes to some sort of dramatic or drastic change. There is almost an implied judgment with some of this language that is problematic because it can (at times) assume that a person was somewhat less than whole before the experience. (I was lost, but now I'm found or I was cruel, but now I'm nice). The language can also suggest a dramatic change in personality or character that seems unrealistic. Sure, I believe in change, but I also believe that lasting changes are often a slow and soul searching process. There is an old punch line from an Alcoholics Anonymous story about a member speaking to a large group and explaining to them how she has changed over the years that she has been in the program. The group is impressed, except for one person who says that what she has described is an impossible turn around, one cannot change who they are

so dramatically. The AA member responds by saying: “well if it is true that I can’t change, at least I am under new management”.

Without denying that dramatic born again events do and can happen; subtle, nagging and small experiences of rebirth also happen – hopefully daily, that we don’t often talk about. Nicodemus, for instance, didn’t have the type of conversion experience we would use in a sermon illustration; he didn’t drop everything and totally overhaul his life to follow Jesus (as Andrew and Simon Peter did). Nicodemus simply allowed himself to be humbled, and to entertain the idea of going under new management.

In his final sermon point, Jesus attempts to explain one last time what it means to be born again and how to make it happen in any context. Look to my story says Jesus. Look to the gospel. Find new management! Jesus makes this final point with Nicodemus by making reference to a story that would be as common to any Jewish reader as the stories I mentioned in the Dmin learning circle: the story of the bronze serpent. The Israelites are plagued with poisonous snakes:

So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.” (Numbers 21:8-9)

For Jewish people the sign of the bronze serpent became a sign of deliverance, it is still a sign of healing for us today. For Nicodemus and the people that this gospel is addressed to, the concept of being born again/ from above was not new, but the concept of looking to Christ for this renewal was. For us, I think it is a call that goes beyond the gospel and the Christian story, and extends to our Christian community, the body of Christ in our world. All of which can provide each of us with different moments of rebirth. I know for me, I feel born again every time we recall the last supper and celebrate communion together. For others it is the reading of the gospel, the prayers of the people or the passing of the peace. For some it is a well placed prayer or kind word in a heated committee or presbytery meeting.

For my wise grandma, I think it was the story of Nicodemus that helped her to be reborn again and again. The night time conversation of a brave man, who trusted in the spirit of God, as intangible as it is.

Whatever we call it and however we identify it, may we be reborn in the spirit, again and again and again. Amen.