

“I’m Going to Remember This Forever”

John 3:1-17

It is quite surprising that Nicodemus, a pharisee, should wish to talk to Jesus at all. Here is a Jewish aristocrat from a distinguished family who went to talk about his soul with a homeless prophet who’d been a carpenter in Nazareth. We have to wonder if Nicodemus is really satisfied with his life, if he is really satisfied with being a “separated one”. Maybe he was looking for something that was missing. Maybe he was looking for an experience that he would remember forever. I’m going to remember this forever.

Of course, Nicodemus came by night. Hopefully, nobody would see him. But still he came, despite his position, his history, his prejudices, his religion, his upbringing, his whole view of life. Here was a man who seemed to have everything, and yet something must have been lacking in his life. He seemed to have it all together, and yet something must have been coming apart for Nicodemus.

And we see Jesus engaging in a conversation with Nicodemus, as he did with so many other people who went to him for help. Jesus always helped people think things through and decide things for themselves.

Nicodemus says to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him”. It’s natural that the miracles would be the first things that we notice.

Jesus answers that it is not the signs that are important but the change in a person's life that can only be described as a "new birth." But we are confused. Nicodemus misunderstands.

Jesus uses the phrase "born anew!" to describe what is required for a person to see the kingdom of God. Some Bible translations use the words, "born again," or "born from above." The original Greek word has all three meanings that don't fit into one English word.

Whatever English words we choose to use, Jesus' meaning is clear. We are to undergo a process of radical change, radical transformation that can only be described as being "born from above" because the whole process of change is not our doing but comes from the grace and power of God.

But we still cannot understand. We want to change but we don't know how.

Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

Nicodemus faces the eternal problem of those of us who want to be changed but can't change ourselves. That is the inevitable and frustrating conclusion to which we are all led when we simply live by the law.

Jesus challenges the law. Ultimately, Jesus fulfills and thereby replaces the law. Yet like Nicodemus we are still controlled by the law. We want to keep things the way they are in a secure, comfortable world we have carefully built for ourselves. God help the preacher who dares to say the "way things are" may not be "God's way".

If we are to really listen to Jesus' words to Nicodemus and if we are to really listen to Jesus' parables like the prodigal son, how could we ever take seriously again the conventional world of common sense where hard work, perseverance, and loyalty are rewarded, -- not pleasure seeking and laziness? It's much easier for us to pass judgment on the father of the prodigal son for being too giving, too generous, and not really fair.

We simply do not need the kind of discomfort and disorientation that Jesus' teachings would cause us if we took his words seriously. We would be robbed of our solid, secure world without offering a replacement except vague hints of a world to come, a kingdom of God, which in reality is more of a nightmare than a dream for most of us Americans.

Can you imagine living in a world in which the despised, ugly, weak, oppressed are placed over the rich and strong and beautiful; a world in which humility and self-sacrifice are honored, leaving no room for pride and self-righteousness? To us it sounds like a nightmare as it did to Nicodemus. He wanted to change, but he didn't know how. He had too much to lose. We have too much to lose.

So, God steps into our lives and does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Through the Sacrament of Baptism, God adopts us into his family. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be "born of water and the Spirit" in order to enter the kingdom of God. Water is the symbol of cleansing. Our past, the sins we want to forget, are not just forgotten, but forgiven.

The Spirit is always the symbol of power. Not only is our past forgiven, but the Spirit enters our lives to enable us to do and be what we ourselves, by ourselves, could never be. So, being born of water and the Spirit includes both cleansing and strengthening to become new people.

Then Jesus says to Nicodemus and to us, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit". By ourselves we are just flesh – limited, easily defeated, and frustrated. We know the limitations of the flesh all too well.

But the Spirit is power and life beyond human power and life. The Spirit forgives us for the past and empowers and changes us for the future.

Jesus says the Spirit is like the wind. We can't see it, we can't understand it, and we certainly can't control it. It blows uninvited into our lives. What it does is destabilize, decenter, and disorient, and cause us to break with our normalcies. We are "blown away" when the wind of God blows – strangely filled with power, resolve, daring, imagination – and suddenly we move outside our established routines.

The coming of the Spirit leads us to a staggering awareness – in order for things to be different, something has to change. Nothing will ever be different if everything is left unchanged.

The Spirit changes our hearts. When our hearts are changed, we get blown outside ourselves to commit uncharacteristic acts of generosity, daring, and freedom. All of a sudden, we decide to forgive our neighbor as we have been forgiven and peace breaks out.

A teacher breaks out of the old, tired curriculum that bores everyone by asking the students to re-imagine the world, and peace is kindled between teacher and students.

A businessperson begins to tithe to his church because he sees it as an investment in the health of his community, but his business partners regard his giving as a waste of resources.

A church gets its mind off itself, its survival, and its budget and moves against normalcy to let the newness of God's Spirit permeate its life.

When people and groups of people are Spirit-changed, born anew, they often can't explain it. "It seemed the right thing to do". "I didn't plan it, I just took a step and then another, and found myself in a new pattern". Or "I couldn't help myself; suddenly it all seemed clear to me, and I knew what I had to do". "I decided that I wanted to take a stand". Or this: "I don't know what got into me".

As a preacher of the Word of God, I know what gets into people. It is the wind. It is the Spirit. It is the wind of God. It is the force and energy of God to push us outside of ourselves, to give ourselves over to the purposes of God that are so much larger than our tired, controlled self-purposes. We cannot program or summon that wind. But we know that when we run risks, energy is strangely given, power and joy are given to us – when we finally decide to move.

Nicodemus, like us, is awfully comfortable to be taking risks and making moves that would change his life. God knows that and he acts in our lives anyway. He sends his wind, his Spirit to us and through us anyway.

God acted in the life of Josh Smithisler when during his junior year at Midpark High School, he signed up to serve in the Army National Guard.

When I asked him why, Josh said, “My brothers joined up the year before so why not?”

Josh went to Fort Benning for basic training the summer before his senior year. After graduating from Midpark in 2006, Josh went to Fort Benning to train as a “human resources specialist” and then was stationed in Chagrin Falls with the 135th Military Police.

In 2009, Josh was deployed to Iraq for a year, making sure soldiers got their two weeks leave once a year to come home. He also helped train Iraqi police and teach them how we operate our police stations.

After a year, Josh came home in 2010 and switched to his brother John’s and best friend Steve’s unit, the engineer battalion based in Brook Park. In June 2010, Josh was deployed with them for one year in Afghanistan. Josh said, “I saw the desert, but had to see the beautiful wintertime mountains”.

In Afghanistan Josh had 3 soldiers under him based at Bagram Airfield where he continued to manage home leaves, did hospital moral visits with the wounded, and helped with ceremonies for KIA soldiers before their caskets were loaded on to planes to come home.

Josh remembers the rocket attacks on the airfield after which he would drive around and help make sure everybody was accounted for.

Josh returned from Afghanistan in June 2011 and completed his service in 2012 after seven years. A year ago, he received his quilt of valor for his response to being called into action to serve his country. I was in the hospital and missed it.

That's what we do this Memorial Day weekend. We remember forever the sacrifices that were made by members of our military who died serving our nation and fighting for our freedoms. Veterans often say when recalling their service, "I'm going to remember this forever". On Memorial Day weekend, we remember our veterans and our loved ones forever.

May the peace of God . . .

Memorial Day Reading – Bill Schiffer

#893 – Before You, Lord We Bow