

Get a Life! (A Spirit-filled Life)

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Now I am not an avid-sports fan, but I live with such a sports fan. Since I have known Chuck, my husband, the obsession with UNC basketball has been tempered by the realities of children, meetings and work responsibilities. But when Carolina basketball is on TV, if there is any way, Chuck will be in position. It is the only thing he watches on TV while sitting on the floor - like a faithful pilgrim bowing down to worship in the "Temple of the Tar Heel." He admits that it is unfortunate that basketball season is during Lent. If he was forced to give up something he really loved - to really sacrifice - for a real life chance to test his dependence on God, the hardest by far would be Tar Heel basketball. You know the kind of person I am talking about. An otherwise rational, calm, person turns into a passionate, yelling fool in the face of the team he or she loves. The fan feels really alive, passionate - it is almost a spiritual experience.

I caught a glimpse of this passion during the current season of sport that we are living through as a nation - the political primaries. You, like I, may have watched a few debates lately. Otherwise, rational calm people become larger than life. People become advocates for their team - mobilizing movements, folks willing to work without pay, and sacrificing for a cause. Usually nice folks, hurl insults. Debates are a fight to win. Strategy is king. Our text today is a debate between Jesus and Nicodemus, but it is also so much more.

On the other hand, candidates, who are just as human as we are, inspire us with rhetoric that connects to our heart of hearts. We are moved by the ideas espoused which are usually followed by plans to make things better, to change. We want life to be better. **CHANGE** is always a key word in a political season.

This is the situation we find in today's passage of Holy Scripture. People are sensing that the **winds of Change are blowing**. Something that can only be described as a movement towards something different is afoot. These Jesus people, the people of the Way, are telling about how God is changing them and others. Then in our text today, Jesus encounters a man in the cover of darkness - a man seeking to find something - to understand - perhaps seeking change. Nicodemus has seen that there is something significant about this Jesus and the group of those joined together in a mission. He wants to get close to it, to be a part of it, **maybe**.

But Nicodemus is a seeker who comes to Jesus in the NIGHT. Nicodemus is a seeker, but is unwilling to meet Jesus in the light of day. You see, Nicodemus is a "man of the cloth", an official insider of the synagogue - a church official called a Pharisee - a keeper of the laws and traditions of the faith. He has to come in the cover of darkness; otherwise, what might others think? They may think that he is seriously considering that Jesus may be the Son of God. I have to give Nicodemus credit - at least he comes, though. He brings his questions and his curiosity.

But there is another meaning at play here; Nicodemus is the one who is in the dark - a metaphor used in John's gospel to mean "separated from God." He knows all the right

behaviors, speaks the language of faith, but something real and alive is missing from his faith. He is fumbling around in the darkness. I feel for Nicodemus.

I have felt stuck in the dark, too. Perhaps you have, as well. For some of us, everything appears to be right - you have the right job, the right credentials, are a good church-goer, have been given family or friends who make life full and better, but something is missing. Or perhaps life is not so shiny on the outside, and you know you need something bigger than yourself - a God who is sovereign. I think Nicodemus knew there was something missing - something more - a sense of God's real and abiding presence.

In contrast to this story of Nicodemus and Jesus, our first Scripture reading is about our ancestor Abraham, who is considered along with Sarah, our great-grandparents in the faith. Incidentally, Our Jewish and Muslim neighbors also claim Abraham and Sarah as their ancestors. Abraham and Sarah's faith and God's work through them began the world's most prominent religious movements. We would do well to understand that more. Anyway, Abraham, like Nicodemus, has a conversation with God Almighty, too. In contrast to Nicodemus, Abraham and Sarah react to the promise and venture out in faith - trusting God with everything - their entire lives. And the result is blessing.

I would love to think we could all be like Abraham and Sarah, to whom God promised many descendents and blessings, and in turn, they simply followed in faith. My guess is that lots of times you and I are more like Nicodemus. Nicodemus brings his questions. He has seen the miracles of Jesus and knows that something special is going on, but he cannot get beyond that. He never really "gets" what Jesus is saying. He comes to ask questions and expects rational, logical reasons for what he is seeing happen. In other words, Nicodemus tries to debate Jesus and get the knowledge he needs to understand. Jesus offers something that goes beyond knowledge to trust and faith. Nicodemus has seen the proof of the signs that Jesus has done, but cannot seem to make himself trust. That, my friends, is only possible through the work of God's Spirit.

When Jesus says you must be born of water and of Spirit, we are reminded of the sacrament of Baptism. We claim the promises for children even before they understand them because it is what God does as a gift to us - God calls us children of God and so we are. Sacraments defy logic and reason - they are signs of a promise that we trust and believe. But Baptism is not just about what God does. Baptism is a covenant promise between us and God, also. We do our part. We claim God's gift and we respond either by committing to our promises to nurture and pray for that child's faith, or as believers, we promise to commit to a life of faith.

Okay, that makes sense, but what about what Jesus says about being *born from above* or *being born of the Spirit*?

When Nicodemus asks how one can be born again or how one can enter again into a mother's womb and be born, Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you" (this is a sign to listen up!), no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of the water and Spirit." (John 3:5)

A Spiritual rebirth is the opposite of living in darkness. It is a life lived in connection to the very presence of God. Unfortunately, Nicodemus still doesn't get it. And he cannot reach the presence of God through his logical argument or even by doing good things, the right things; he can only receive the gift of faith. And in some ways he is perishing, not really living fully.

You see, living in the buckle of the Bible belt, we have heard the phrase, "Born again" so much it has become flat and doesn't mean anything anymore. Typically, it is not a phrase that Presbyterian-type Christians even feel comfortable using, but we have to look again. We have all seen John 3:16 - a banner held up at the Super Bowl or sports events. But this Scripture is so much more than a billboard ad for God.

It is an essential part of the Biblical witness to us - a word of truth and life.

Yes, it is true that God so loved the world that God gave his only Son so that those who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life. But we believe that a life lived in God is one that can only be a gift of God's Holy Spirit. The phrases born anew or born from above or born again, all have the important word *born* in them. We are born only after someone else bears us - you've heard the words to Mary, "You will bear a child, and his name shall be Jesus." Mary had to bear Jesus. Mothers bear children. The child is not alive away from the nourishment and life-giving connection of a cord that links the mother and the baby. In the same way the Spirit is that which nourishes us, gives us life, and faith in the one eternal God who comes to us as God the Creator, Jesus the Redeemer, and the Spirit - the one we call the Sustainer. If you wish to get a life - you can receive it as a gift of the Spirit. The Spirit gives us new life. And you and I can have eternal life now - a vital, full, abundant life.

Ann Landers, now deceased, was a popular columnist who answers questions in the newspapers. One day this actually ran in the newspapers. I think you might recognize who wrote it. I think it may have been Nicodemus.

Dear Ann: I am not a religious man. In fact, I consider myself an atheist. I am also very ethical and have high moral standards. I donate to more than a dozen charities. I am kind to animals, children, and the environment. I would never raise my hand to my wife or children, and I treat them as the precious people they are. I strive to make the world a better place and understand those different from myself. I am intelligent and kind, and stand up for what I believe. I never impose my beliefs on those around me. So, why is it that as soon as people find out I don't believe in God, they tell me I am going to hell? One woman said, "You cannot possibly have good morals if you don't believe." This is nonsense. I know plenty of "God-fearing, church-going folk" who have rotten moral standards. I am sick and tired of people making moral judgments about me based solely on the fact that I do not believe in religion. How can I get these well-meaning but ignorant people off my back?

Signed: Unbeliever in Maryland¹

Another pastor, Dena Williams, writes her response to this Nicodemus.

Dear Unbelieving Friend,

You sound a lot like someone else I know, a man named Nicodemus. Oh, Nicodemus was a religious person, in every sense of the word. He went to the synagogue, kept the laws, and was a believer. That is not what you have in common with him. Nicodemus, though, also lived an upright life: he was kind and responsible, intelligent and thoughtful. He was as comfortable with his life as you seem to be with yours.

Yet Nicodemus seemed to know there was something missing. When a new prophet, preaching a message of love and forgiveness came to town, Nicodemus realized he was

searching. He was searching for the presence of God in his life. He went by night, anonymously, to see Jesus.

You have come anonymously as well. I wonder if you, too, are seeking God's presence. I wonder if you are seeking love and forgiveness. Do you, too, sense something missing in your life? The language you use to describe yourself is telling: you say that you are "sick and tired."

There is good news for you. It is the same good news that Jesus spoke to Nicodemus. It is the good news of life, born of water and spirit, life for Nicodemus, life for you, life for all people. The good news for all of us is that God is present in our lives, bidden or unbidden, God is present.

Your friend, Dena²

"For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

The truth of the Gospel is that Jesus comes to bring light in the darkness and to shed that light into our searching lives. The God who bears us into life wants us to have a life filled with the Spirit. That is good news for every Nicodemus, child, man and woman. In the name of the Father, Son, and the life-giving Holy Spirit, AMEN.

Notes

1. Ann Landers, The Denver Post, February 22, 2002.
2. Dena Williams, excerpt from *Lectionary Homiletics*, February 17, 2008. Dena serves King of Glory Lutheran Church, Arvada, Colorado. This is her creative response to the Ann Landers column.