

## ***Encounters with Jesus: Nicodemus***

A sermon preached by  
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First United Methodist Church  
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### **John 3:1-16**

*There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.”*

*Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born anew,<sup>[a]</sup> it’s not possible to see God’s kingdom.”*

*Nicodemus asked, “How is it possible for an adult to be born? It’s impossible to enter the mother’s womb for a second time and be born, isn’t it?”*

*Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don’t be surprised that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ God’s Spirit<sup>[b]</sup> blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. It’s the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said, “How are these things possible?”*

*“Jesus answered, “You are a teacher of Israel and you don’t know these things? I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don’t receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One.<sup>[c]</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One<sup>[d]</sup> be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life.*

Last night we had the opportunity to celebrate twenty years of service at our annual Appalachia Service Project dinner. The impact of this program on our youth and adults has been profound, and I’m so grateful to all the people that made the evening possible. Jane’s leadership of this program and process, her relationships with our youth, and her unflagging devotion to the poor has done nothing less than transform our congregation into the people we are today. Thank you again Jane.

This weekend’s events have gotten me to take my own walk down memory lane. Twenty-two years ago this month, I sat in a church conference room in Naperville and met with Bishop Sheldon Duecker and three District Superintendents. Their goal was to find a new pastor for this church, and mine was to look and act more confident than I was. They asked me a whole

host of questions about my experience, my beliefs, my theology, and my commitment to the denomination. They seemed concerned about my relatively young age and my lack of Illinois roots. Toward the end of the conversation someone asked me about my stance on LGBTQ issues (a term that wasn't being used then) and the Reconciling Ministry program.

I took a deep breath and I told them that I was proud to be a graduate of the only United Methodist seminary, at the time of my attendance, that didn't bar admission to openly gay or lesbian students, even in the 1970's. I told them that I thought the stance of the church at that time was wrong and would eventually change. And I also told them that I didn't plan to lead the congregation into becoming reconciling because I had seen some churches experience division and conflict over that decision. I got the job, but for years I struggled with a growing sense of what I knew to be right and the dark temptations of institutional survival.

After that, I read, prayed, talked, and prayed some more about what I had said. Was I right to avoid the conflict? I had those same struggles when parishioners asked me to preside at their marriages and I said I couldn't because they loved someone that didn't fit into the gender conformity of my denomination's perspectives. Friends and colleagues gently and not so gently pushed and prodded me... "It's Evanston," they said, "What in the world have you got to lose?" But I stayed the course. I convinced myself that our mission statement was doing the heavy lifting. It said we were a place that *invited all people*. Wasn't that enough? But of course, it wasn't. My LGBTQ brothers and sisters didn't know for certain where the church stood. They sat next to people in the pew wondering if they'd be loved and cared for if they came out to them.

Finally, a few years ago, led by a group of committed friends and members of the church, we started a process of conversation, of listening, and ultimately of truth telling that declared First Church to be a Reconciling Congregation. Since that time the congregation has been renewed. Today, we are a congregation that practices marriage equality and our pastors are here to minister to all people. So, in all of the ways that I understand Jesus, we have been born again.

Alyce McKenzie, professor of preaching and worship at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas, was sitting in the waiting area of her local tire store. She was reading a magazine when a pamphlet appeared in front of her face: *How to Be Born Again*. "Have you been born again?" the earnest 40-something man wanted to know.

Now, just in case you are planning a similar evangelistic mission, I'll give you a pointer. Do not ask a seminary professor if she has been born again, unless you have time to listen to an answer that isn't likely to end with yes or no.

McKenzie answered, "I'm glad you asked that question. I've been reflecting on Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John's gospel and I don't think Jesus means 'born again' as if it were some emotional lightning strike that once it's over, we speak of our salvation in the past tense, like, that's done, now I have that checked off my to-do list. I think being born again calls for our participation, and I think it's a lifelong process."

It is interesting, really, that this phrase "born again" has become Christian-speak for being saved, for accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. Interesting that so many people use this phrase to imply a dramatic conversion moment. Because the phrase comes from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, who most certainly did not have a dramatic conversion moment.

But born again or born from above, either way this is not a one-time dramatic conversion for Nicodemus. To begin with, we know that he came to Jesus "at night," which indicates some hesitation, some sneaking around. Margaret Hess calls Nicodemus the "patron saint of the curious."

The people who have been in the congregation during the last twenty-two years know that my conversion, my new birth, has been a slow and sometimes plodding course. Some here were certainly hoping for a lightning strike, but that wasn't the way that God chose to work in my heart and mind.

With the benefit of hindsight, I'm embarrassed that it took so long. It feels like a lack of courage on my part. And to those of you who stuck around to wait for my new birth, I am grateful for your patience and your love.

In John's gospel, Nicodemus' initial encounter with Jesus becomes the identifying feature of Nicodemus. Later he is known as "Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier." Even later in the gospel he is identified as "Nicodemus, the man who had earlier visited Jesus at night." And though we don't know what Nicodemus believed about Jesus, even though Nicodemus himself might not have known what he believed about Jesus — he is nonetheless defined by his encounter with Jesus. That initial conversation with Jesus under the cover of night meant something to Nicodemus. It changed him — somehow, slowly, it changed him.

I know some people do have radical conversion stories. But I also know that there is a lot of Nicodemus in all of us. Those of us who are curious. Who want to ask questions and then need time to wait for the answers. There are some of us who, after years of knowing Jesus, still aren't sure exactly what we think about him. We don't know exactly what we believe. We don't know exactly what this belief in him means for us.

And yet, Jesus has changed our lives. Slowly. Sometimes so slowly that it is barely perceptible to us. But over time we are more and more defined by our encounters with him. More and more motivated by our love for him. And this, too, is a path of discipleship worth walking. A story worth telling.

What darkness have you been holding on to? What belief or guilt, what anger or pain, what fear or anxiety is still claiming you after years, perhaps decades in its grip? Are you like a child in a mother's womb who just won't come out? Are you waiting for a lightning strike when perhaps your new birth is already being accomplished? Because I firmly believe that you are being changed, even if you don't recognize it yet. Ever so slowly you are being born again to do the work that Jesus invites you to do. That, brothers and sisters, is life eternal. AMEN