

No Easy Answers"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

Did you ever play a game called cross questions and silly answers? It's an old parlor game in which one group of persons is given a question to ask, and another group of persons is given an answer. But the answers are not necessarily relevant to the question being asked. It doesn't sound like much fun when you describe it, but the wrong question and the wrong answer paired together can sometimes be absolutely hilarious.

When I read today's lectionary reading from the gospel of John, I thought about that game. In verses 14-21 we are given an answer for a question. But, the answer won't make much sense unless we refer to the question that is asked by Nicodemus in verses 1-13.

So, let me help you understand the answer we have already read in our lesson for today by giving you the question.

It seems that a smart man by the name of Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be "born again." And that's where the question comes into the picture. Nicodemus asks Jesus, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can a person enter the mother's womb a second time?"

This very famous encounter has always intrigued me. What does it mean to be born again? In one sense we say with Nicodemus that being born again is just not a possibility.

BORN AGAIN INDUSTRIES

And yet, aren't there many industries whose sole focus is to help us achieve a quasi "born again" status? How about those infomercials that tell us a certain product will restore lost hair? Or what about the health industry. Go to any mall in America, and you'll find stores dedicated to healthy eating, healthy cooking and special nutritional supplements. Why do you think these stores are so popular?

People want to be born again or at least they want to turn back the clock as far as possible.

Now, I'm not saying trying to be healthy is bad thing by any stretch of the imagination. Every morning I ride my exercise bike for thirty minutes. I do two hundred "crunches" and lift weights every other day. If you think I do that because I like to sweat and get winded, you just don't know me. My idea of fun is to watch a good movie with a really big tub of popcorn.

But, I do it because I want to hold the forces of nature at bay if only for a little while. It's my attempt to physically at least ... to be born again.

It's amazing how well some people can do at this. A while back I saw an interview that someone had with Jack LaLane. Remember Jack ... the fitness nut?

Eighty years plus and still lifting weights, drinking juice and making me feel tired by just listening to his hyperactive fitness routine.

Jack really believed that it was possible to be "born again" through physical fitness.

I love Jack's commitment and enthusiasm, but we all reach a point when we realize that it just won't work.

We will not be born again through physical fitness no matter how hard we try.

We will never have the flowing long hair of our youth ... no matter how much Rogaine we purchase.

REGRET

But, the biggest hindrance to being born again is not declining health.. The biggest hindrance to being born again is something called regret.

When I honestly look back on my life, I realize that there are more things undone than done. I am filled with regret about the people I have let down and the promises that were not kept.

And I know that now for many things ... it is too late. It seems like yesterday that I was an eager young person full of questions and idealism. Now I often find myself full of tired old answers and cynicism. With Nicodemus I wistfully long for a rebirth, but I'm just not sure it is possible. You know the saying. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." Well, sometimes I wonder if I'm one of those "old dogs."

Jesus tells us all that we must be born again.
But, for many of us that just doesn't seem very likely.
Too much water has passed under the bridge.

What about you? Do you think it's possible to be born again? Do you think it's possible to be given a new lease on life? Or are you an "old dog" like Nicodemus and I? Be honest now. What do you really believe?

Jesus tells old dogs like Nicodemus and me and perhaps you that not only is it possible to be born again ... it's a necessity. You must be born again. That is the way to new life. That is the way to life eternal.

Now obviously we can't turn back the clock physically or even mentally.... at least not to the degree that we would like. But, Jesus tells us that it is possible to turn back the clock spiritually. It is possible to renew our spirit in an eternal way.

NO EASY ANSWERS

Now how can that happen?

It happens first of all by recognizing that there's still a lot that we don't know and don't understand. There are no easy answers to life's big questions.

That sounds obvious, but I know a great many people who can't accept this truth. Some are educated and some are not. Some are young and some are old.

People of this type come from every race, creed and country.

But, they all have one thing in common.

They all say with Nicodemus, "We know about Jesus." We have the "answers" when it comes to faith.

But, suppose, like Nicodemus, we are wrong? Suppose we are giving the right answers to the wrong questions? Could we not be playing our own theological version of the old parlor game, Cross Questions and Silly answers?

Nicodemus was an esteemed and knowledgeable leader of Israel. I'm not sure exactly how old Nicodemus was, but I have always imagined Nicodemus with gray hair and gray beard ... a tired old man who has been worn down by life. He wore the distinctive garb of the Pharisee. In my mind it looks like the academic robe that some of us preachers wear.

Anyway, as this esteemed teacher began his interview with Jesus, he began as most teachers do by saying in his most impressive voice, "We know, Jesus, that you are a teacher sent by God." Doubtless Nicodemus wanted to engage Jesus in a little "teacher talk" about the fine points of theology. But, he would find that the talk that day would be less academic and more personal.

Jesus said,

"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."
John 3:3 (NIV)

In my opinion, teachers and preachers still want to be too academic and theoretical at times. But, Jesus moved to a more important question. Who is included in God's kingdom and how does that happen? Jesus, as he seemed to do with most everyone he met, moved this experienced teacher of Israel to a place where he was not so sure about the questions or the answers. Over and over again in this conversation we hear this teacher of Israel ask, "How can this be?"

Being born again means many things, but I think that one thing it always means is being willing to go with Jesus on a spiritual adventure. Being born again means going with Jesus to a place where our tired old answers no longer work a place where there are many questions but few easy answers.

And those of us who think we "know" something about Jesus are sometimes the most reluctant to take such the journey. Like Nicodemus, we come to Jesus at night ... in the dark ... so to speak. The light we need is not to be found in familiar places and ideas. The light we need is found in a radical openness to the power of God in Jesus Christ. Anything less than this will cause even the brightest theologian to end up in a place of confusion and dissatisfaction.

Jesus asked Nicodemus, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

John 3:10

PRESBYTERIANS WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING?

Whenever I've read this passage, the thought has occurred to me that Jesus might ask me the same question, "You say that you're a minister of the word and sacrament and yet you don't seem to have a grasp on even the most basic things!"

Now, don't get me wrong. The seminary didn't do a bad job training me in the art of Bible study and the practical skills of pastoral care and church administration.

But, despite that training, I recognize that there is another way of knowing Jesus that cannot come from study and the effort. It is a more personal knowledge that comes through the working of His Spirit. It is a surprising encounter that shows me what I once believed to be true is not right.

When it comes to that kind of knowledge, quite often I feel like I'm at the beginning of the journey rather than at the end.

In the Presbyterian Church we now have a special General Assembly Committee which is entitled, "The Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church." Of course, the Presbyterian way of dealing with anything is to form a committee.

And, as some of you may have already guessed, the reason we have a task force with this name is that lately in the Presbyterian Church we've had very little peace, unity or purity! In fact, we are very divided on many issues. As I like to put it, if there are two Presbyterians discussing a subject, there will be at least four opinions on what should be done!

Usually, our diversity has helped us, but sometimes this "gift" can seem more like a curse! So, we have brought together very liberal and very conservative theologians from across the church to see if we might find some unity in our diversity.

When I heard what they were doing, I thought to myself, "This will never work. These people are too different. It'll be more like the Jerry Springer Show than a committee of General Assembly!"

And, for a while, it looked like I might be right.

But, according to the latest issue of our denomination's newspaper, the group is making significant progress not necessarily in terms of theological consensus but in terms of personal growth and change.

Barbara Wheeler, the president of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City, said that one of the group's key discoveries is that the gospel "can be powerfully proclaimed by someone with whom you don't agree at all."

Gary Demarest, a retired minister from Pasadena, California put it this way, "I feel I'm experiencing the Body of Christ in a new way. Serving on this task force has been one of the really fine privileges of my whole journey." (And that, by the way, has been a journey of more than 50 years in ministry.)

What made the difference? What has led this group to disagree so agreeably? The News put it this way, "The difference ... is [a] year of praying together and studying scripture together and laughing together over meals. In short, they've come to love each other."

Believe me, none of us thought that this would happen. But, now the group is fretting about how the whole church could share this experience. One member said, "This is one of the most powerful experiences of the Holy Spirit I've ever had" but he was not so sure that such an experience is "marketable and transferable."

NOT MARKETABLE AND TRANSFERABLE

I would say that he has a point. Indeed, that's what Jesus told Nicodemus. He said,

"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." John 3:6-8 (NRSV)

As we see in the NRSV translation, "born again" can also be translated "born from above." That is, spiritual change must always begin with God's Spirit which is like the wind.

We don't know where the wind comes from or where it goes. We can't control it. But, we do know that it exists. We see signs of the wind wherever we go, and we trust that the wind will be with us forever. So it is with God's Spirit. We can't control it. But, the signs of His presence is all around us if only we had eyes to see and ears to hear.

The committee member was right. Works of the Spirit cannot be controlled by us. They are not "marketable and transferable." But, I would disagree with the idea that we can do nothing to encourage such works.

The committee has really shown us the way. We can make it a point to bring what we have and who we are to Jesus and to those who are disciples of Jesus even ... no especially ... to those who may disagree with us.

Maybe our diversity is a gift after all because the word of one who disagrees with me causes me to at least question what "I know" about Jesus. Maybe the wind of the Spirit is blowing in a direction that I have not considered. Maybe I've been trying to answer a question that is not all that important. Maybe Jesus would have me answer new questions with answers only He can give?

When Augustine was thinking about becoming a Christian, he tried reading the Bible. He was not impressed. In his mind the Bible did not compare favorably with the great literature of the day. So he complained to Ambrose of Milan about the inferiority of the Bible, and Ambrose told him,

"You silly little [child], you have not the skills for reading the Bible. When you read, you erroneously think that a 'fish' is a 'fish' or a loaf of bread is but a loaf of bread and nothing else. No. In the Bible everyday things are transformed, become signs for deeper, richer meaning."

Augustine said that his eyes were opened, and a whole new world was opened to him. I think that the process of salvation comes to us in much the same way. Our eyes are opened to possibilities we never even considered by signs too deep for words.

THE TRIUMPH OF GRACE

The new life that comes to us through Christ Jesus will not come because we are such clever, smart people who are able to analyze and figure out salvation for ourselves. It will come by grace through faith. It will come as a sovereign act of God's Spirit and will be based upon God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

Jesus answered Nicodemus' question about being born again by referring to something that was yet to occur at the time. Being born again would happen through the power of the cross.

Jesus said, "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." John 3:14-15 (NRSV)

This refers to when the Israelites were wandering in the desert before they entered the promised land. It seems that once again they were rebelling against God's authority so God sent a plague of snakes to punish the people for their rebellious attitudes.

But, with the judgment, there also came a means of salvation. Those doomed to die from snakebite could be healed by obeying God's command to look up at the elevated bronze snake and by believing that God would heal them if they did. (Numbers 21:8-9)

In the same way, those who looked upon the crucified and risen Christ would know that God had taken away their sin. This is the heart of the gospel. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. This is a simple message, but this is also a message of great mystery as well.

It is certainly not the easy answer that many have made it. It is a complex and difficult answer of salvation through sacrifice and a love that comes with no strings attached.

To put it another way, God is not out to get us. God is out to save us. And the heart of that salvation is seen by looking up to the cross. As the hymn puts it, "When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died, my richest gains I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride "

We may not know all the answers. The answers may not come easily. But, I think the cross at least gets us in the right ball park.

If God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world but to save the world if God brought forgiveness and salvation out of a horrible death on a cross by those who were enemies of God and God's kingdom doesn't that say something about what we are to believe about God and others?

The kingdom of God is about the triumph of grace. The kingdom of God is about God's love being stronger than the power of evil. The kingdom of God is about redemption coming from all places and all angles even death on a cross.

It is not an easy answer. But, it is a blessed answer.

I am so grateful to tell others that God is not out to get them. I am so grateful to tell others that God is instead out to save them. I am so privileged to proclaim the good news that in Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven and we are freed to live in a new and different way.

CAN WE ACCEPT GRACE?

The question is this:

“Can we accept this difficult answer?”

Jesus said some would accept this answer and some wouldn't.

Some would never be able to accept an answer that was so different from what they thought was the truth. Some would never be able to get away from a life of judgment, and for that reason, they themselves would be judged.

But, some would be able to accept this answer. Some would be able to embrace a salvation that was as deep and wide as all creation. They would see God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. They would be saved.

There are no easy answers, but there is one very difficult answer. It comes in the shape of a cross, and it is the bridge to life eternal.

Amen.