

The Unasked Question

March 15, 2014

Ther Rev. Frank Allen

First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, FL

John 3:1-17

1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 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.” 3 Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 4 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?” 5 Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8 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.” 9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

11 “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. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

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

ASKING JESUS A QUESTION

If you had an evening alone with Jesus, what would you say to him? What would you ask him? Would you compliment him on his great teaching? Would you ask him why bad things happen to good people?

What would you say to Jesus? What question would you pose?

That's a hard for us to answer. Many of us think that we know all about Jesus.

And yet Jesus remains a mystery. In our hearts we ask questions of Jesus all the time. Like Nicodemus sometimes we hear the message of the Bible, and ask, "How can this be?"

The best biblical scholars come up with radically different interpretations of the life and message of Jesus. If our best teachers give us different and even contradictory portraits of Jesus, what chance do we have to really know him?

So perhaps if I had an evening alone with Jesus I would ask him, "Who are you, really? Are you really the person I think you are or do I have it wrong? Have I somehow misunderstood the message?"

I somehow think that even though I have studied the life and message of Jesus all my life, his answer to my questions would surprise me.

In a way Jesus remains a stranger to all of us because our understanding of him is distorted by our own experience and biases. This was true of Nicodemus. His training as a teacher of Israel predisposed him to look at Jesus in a certain way. And that prevented him from really seeing Jesus and understanding what Jesus was all about.

I think Nicodemus is asking an implicit question in our lesson for today. He is asking, "Who are you Jesus? Make it plain so that I can understand."

But, even though this question prompted Nicodemus' visit, Nicodemus did not ask a question when he came to Jesus by night. Instead, this leader made a statement about Jesus.

He said, "We know who you are. You are teacher who has come from God. Nobody could do the things that you are doing if God was not with him."

A CHALLENGE TO AUTHORITY

But, the powerful works of Jesus also presented a problem to those in charge, people like Nicodemus. Jesus not only said what only God could say and did what only God could do; he also challenged the authority of the powers that be.

For example, in John's gospel the cleansing of the Temple precedes our passage for today. You remember the story. Jesus drove out the moneychangers and those who were selling animals for sacrifice in the Temple courtyard. He said that they were making His Father's house into a marketplace.

And the religious leaders asked Jesus, "Who gave you the authority to do this? Give us a sign that you have this kind of authority." Jesus said that if they would tear down this Temple, he would build it up again in three days.

Jesus was speaking metaphorically about his death and resurrection, but the religious leaders had no way of knowing that. They took it literally.

They said, "What are you talking about? The Temple has been under construction for forty-six years and you're going to build it back in three days? Give us a break."

Jesus went on to do many miraculous signs in Jerusalem during Passover, and he was becoming very popular with the people.

But, Jesus didn't let the popularity go to his head. Yes, the crowds that were wowed by his ministry, but they didn't really understand who he was and what he was doing any more than the religious leaders.

Even though Jesus was popular with the crowds he also remained a mystery to them as well.

BORN AGAIN

But, the popularity of Jesus presented a vexing problem for the religious leaders. This very powerful and charismatic teacher was challenging their authority. Someone needed to find out who he was and why he was doing this.

So, Nicodemus on behalf of his colleagues came to Jesus under the cover of darkness to find out something about this mysterious and troublesome man. He wanted to know, "Who is this man? What does he want with us? Who is Jesus?"

Now Nicodemus didn't want to tip his hand too soon, so he begins with a flattering statement. "We know that you're a teacher who has come from God."

But, Jesus glosses right over that flattering statement and gets right to the unspoken question.

It turns out that Nicodemus and his friends don't really know anything about Jesus.

Jesus replies to Nicodemus' unspoken question by saying, "You're not going to understand anything about God's kingdom unless you are changed by the power of God. You need to be born again (or as the NRSV translates born from above).

Nicodemus seems to take this in a very literal way. What are you talking about Jesus? We can't be born again. That's impossible. That's crazy talk.

The born again metaphor was not used for Jews but for Gentiles who wanted to become a part of the Jewish faith. When Jewish converts were baptized and welcomed into the faith it was said that they were born again.

But, this experience of being born again was not for the Jews. They were already God's people. They didn't need to be baptized. Right?

Well actually in preparation for the coming of Jesus, John the Baptist baptized everyone including Jews. The coming of Jesus changed everything.

BORN OF THE SPIRIT

Who is Jesus?

We who have been reading the gospel of John already know. He is the Word made flesh. He is God with us. He is the transforming power that comes from above. He is the one who makes new life possible.

But, Jesus is telling Nicodemus (and us) that knowing is not enough. In order to receive the Word of God we have to be transformed. We have to become a new creation. We have to be baptized not only with water but also with the power of the Spirit.

And where do we get this Spirit?

Well, we don't get the Spirit. The Spirit gets us. Salvation is not a work that we accomplish. Salvation is not a program that we undertake. Salvation is God's work, totally.

Think about it. Do babies choose to be born? Babies do not choose to be born.

And in making birth a central image in this discussion Jesus is saying that our relationship to God is something that God does. It is not something that we choose. It is something that God chooses.

It comes from above.

Now this is a very hard lesson for do it yourself, hard working people like you and me to accept. We tell people, "Take control of your life."

And we have programs that help us do just that. People tell us that we can become physically fit, financially sound and spiritually whole if only we will follow their program.

I saw an advertisement in the Orlando Sentinel yesterday for a church that was proclaiming a workshop on "spiritual training." How can we be trained for something that we can't control?

Jesus tells us that even our leaders don't have a clue, and our only hope is to be born from above, changed by the power of God's Spirit.

And that Spirit is very mysterious in the way it works. The Spirit is like the wind. (In fact in the Bible the word for spirit and the word for wind are the same word.)

We don't know where the wind comes from or where it goes. We can't control it. We can't see it.

But, can feel it and hear it. We can see the results of a strong wind. We know its there.

It is the same with God's Spirit.

Like the wind we can't see it but we can feel it, and we can see the results of its action. Lives are changed by the power of the Spirit. We become new creations. It is like we are reborn.

GOD IN THE FLESH

But, Nicodemus is still skeptical. He asks, “How can this be?”

It is one thing to know about the Word of God. It is quite another thing to be transformed by the Word of God. Nicodemus taught God’s word, but he did not know the power of the Word that comes from above.

Nicodemus spent an evening with Jesus, but he still did not really know who he was. Nicodemus said, “We know that you are a teacher who comes from God.” But, Nicodemus and his friends had gotten it wrong.

Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not from God. He was God in the flesh. And salvation for the whole world would come through him.

In order to answer Nicodemus’ unspoken question Jesus refers to a story from the Old Testament.

When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, they often complained. They were afraid and didn’t trust God to provide what they needed. They wanted to return to Egypt. In Egypt they were slaves, but at least they knew where their next meal was coming from.

On one occasion as they complained, they wandered into a nest of venomous snakes. Many of them died, and they cried out to Moses to intervene for them before God.

Moses did, and God told Moses to fashion the image of a venomous snake and put it on a pole. When the people looked up at that image they would be healed. They would be saved.

Moses made this snake out of bronze and lifted it up in the wilderness. And when the people looked up and saw it, they were saved. (Numbers 21:4-9)

This is a very curious story. The image of their torment became the image of their salvation. Jesus likens this to the cross. He said that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so the Son of Man must be lifted up so that whoever believes in him will be saved.

Of course this made no sense to Nicodemus.

But, we, the readers of the gospel of John, know quite well what Jesus is talking about. We know that the symbol of torment and evil in the ancient world will be transformed by the power of God's grace into the symbol of hope and salvation.

Ironically, salvation comes by way of the cross. Evil is transformed into a means of grace by the power of God's forgiveness.

And this transformation will not be limited one time and place. This Spirit of forgiveness will bring hope to the whole world.

Sometimes we ask, "Why doesn't God do something about the terrible evil in our world?"

God did do something. God loved the world so much that he sent his Son into the world.

His Son didn't come to condemn us (although we deserve condemnation). Instead, God sent His Son into the world to save us.

THE STORY CONTINUES

Again this is something that Nicodemus didn't understand at the time. He couldn't. The cross was still in the future.

But, later he seems to at least get an inkling of what Jesus was talking about. When the critics of Jesus are trying to arrest him, it is only Nicodemus who defends Jesus, citing Jesus' great knowledge of the law.

And in a final cameo appearance Nicodemus joins Joseph of Arimathea in helping him care for the body of Jesus after he is removed from the cross. (John 19:39-42)

I think somehow Nicodemus finally did get an answer to his unasked question.

Jesus got through to Nicodemus that night. Nicodemus heard something. He understood.

Martin Luther once called John 3:16 the gospel in brief. I agree.

The defining characteristic of God is love. The love of God moves toward us in his Son, Jesus. In His great love God sent his Son into the world to bring us eternal life.

Our hope is not in what we can do. Our hope is in what God has already done for us in Jesus.

“Yes we can” was the slogan for a recent presidential campaign.

They may have made a good campaign slogan, but it is not good theology. A better slogan might be, “No, you can’t, but God can ... and God will.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITH

Here’s where faith comes into the equation. Like those who wandered in the wilderness, many of us have been “snake bit” by life.

And so we focus on the evil around us. We focus on what we lack instead of what we have.

We are discouraged. We are tempted to return to those things that once enslaved us.

In response to our despair, Jesus tells us, “Look to the cross.” Look up at the sign of God’s salvation instead of focusing on the evil that surrounds us.

The Bible tells us that the death and resurrection of Jesus were but the first act in a salvation drama that will continue until the end of time. Those who spend their time constructing crosses will be defeated. When all is said and done, those instruments of destruction and despair will not win the day.

God’s justice and God’s mercy will win the day.

When we look to the cross we have read the final chapter of the book. We know how this story ends. We know the love of God. And we know the power of the resurrection.

God is a God who comes to us in love. The God who created the world promises to recreate the world, and we get to be a part of that new creation.

We get to be born again. We get to be born from above. We get to be born anew.

Of course we're not there yet. There are many reasons to throw up our hands and give up. And that's where faith comes into the picture.

Faith means trusting in the promises of God. Faith means believing.

The gospel in brief, John 3:16 lifts up the importance of faith in the salvation process. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who *believes* in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

There is no substitute for faith. We are saved by grace through faith.

We don't believe that God is not out to get us. We believe God is out to save us. And in the dark of the night we are called to trust that promise.

What about you? Do you believe that?

Do you believe that God was in Christ, that God is a God of love and forgiveness?

Do you believe that when all is said and done grace will triumph?

In the dark night of the soul we will have an opportunity to visit with Jesus.

But, we will not ask him questions. When he comes to us, there will be no doubt about who he is and what he has come to do.

Instead, we will fall on our knees like Thomas did long ago. And we too will say,

"My Lord and my God!"

And we too will be born again.

Amen.