

The story of Nicodemus is such a familiar story – and we’ve heard it preached about several times in our recent past. That is ok. New insights can be gained from old familiar stories. This story of Nicodemus is the next scripture in our summer sermon series, Seeking Peace Together. Again, if you wish, we have interactive material that you may wish to reflect on your own.

Let’s hear the story of Nicodemus, then I want to share with you some reflections:

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.”

As we were reflecting on the way God calls us, we discerned several important things.

1. Jesus receives us however we come
2. Encounters with Jesus will change us forever
3. In every conversation, but specifically with disciples or those asking questions – Jesus encourages and invites the questioner to a deeper level of relationship.

First, though, it needs to be said that Jesus receives us however we come to him. Are we dirty and smelly like James and John who were fishermen on the water – Come. Are we possessed by 5 demons – as was Mary Magdalene – Come. Are we studiers of the Word and minding our own business under a fig tree like Bartholomew – Come. Are we calm and confident – like Philip – come. Are we zealous in our demand for Justice like Simon the Zealot – come. Are we dead to the world, like Lazarus – come. Are we curious with no boundaries – like little children – Come. Are we untrustworthy and apt to betray like Judas – Come. Are we argumentative, like Mary and Martha – Come. Are we doubtful like Thomas – Come. Are we brazen and bold like Peter – come. And are we afraid of what others would say if they knew we went to see Jesus – like Nicodemus – Jesus says – Come.

Whatever way that we come to Jesus – with whatever agenda – Jesus says, “Come” Come see where I live. Come, hear what I have to say. Let me engage in conversation with you. Let me touch you. Let me let you give me water. Let me heal your wounds. Let me heal your wounded spirit. Come.

Nicodemus came at night – likely because he had questions that he wanted to ask Jesus but didn’t want his colleagues to know that he was going to engage Jesus. He was, perhaps, testing the water, to see whether he wanted to jump in. Jesus welcomed Nicodemus and began a discussion with him that has become, perhaps, the most important discussion about what it means to be a follower of Jesus in our whole Bible.

Jesus didn't condemn Nicodemus for coming at night. The fact that he came at night wasn't even an issue for Jesus. He asked good questions, he wanted to know the answers, he pondered and reflected and still he likely didn't get it right.

What we learn from Nicodemus is that it is ok to ask questions and not understand the answers given. These answers can percolate in our mind for years and perhaps new meaning can be found the more we think about them. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to ponder what it could mean.

And this leads me to my second revelation. All who meet Jesus are forever changed. These midnight questions aren't the last time we hear of Nicodemus in the gospel of John. No. In John 7, Nicodemus questions the Pharisees about their desire to have Jesus arrested as a "deceiver". He protests and argues that the LAW requires everyone to receive a fair hearing. In response, the chief priests and Pharisees accuse him of having joined Jesus' followers.

While this accusation isn't affirmed or denied, we do hear of Nicodemus even later in the book of John when he and Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' body and bury him in a tomb. John 19: 39 says that Nicodemus came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. He and Joseph then took Jesus' body, wrapped it with the spices in the linen cloths and buried him in a new tomb.

We do not know what happened to Nicodemus after that, but what we do know is that he did not remain quiet before his peers and that he honoured Jesus' body after he had died. Does this mean he was a follower of Jesus? We do not know. But we do know that his encounter with Jesus that night led to change within him. For that we are thankful.

This leads me to the third point: What is Jesus actually talking about? In every conversation, especially those where questions of faith and life are asked – Jesus encourages and invites the questioner to a deeper level of relationship. His response to Nicodemus is no exception.

In response to Nicodemus' question, "how can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into a mothers' womb and be born?" Jesus answers, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."

We've talked about this for many thousands of years, have we not? What is this born anew or born from above or born of water and spirit? To put it simply, new life is being born again. Even more specifically, Jesus says, "what is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."

But I am still confused – perhaps, we can look at this passage differently – drawing in what other good teachers have said about this same thing...knowing full well that for now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now we know only in part; then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known. (1 Cor 13:12) This gives me consolation and permission to not be perfect – but to do my best.

Our theme passage at PNMC last weekend was Colossians 3:1-4; 12-17. Earlier in Chapter 2, Paul gives us a hint about what Jesus means in his conversation with Nicodemus about being born again. Paul says, "when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:12)"

Paul continues in Chapter 3:1-5a: So, if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly.” And then Paul gives a list of all the horrible things that we put to death when we take in new life in Christ.

Sam Adams, pastor at Bend Mennonite, and preacher at our Saturday morning worship time, explained it this way, “this is all language drawn from the Christian practice of baptism. In our baptisms we go into the water, into the grave, with Jesus. We identify that our lives are there with him in the grave. We have died. And, as we come up, out of the water, and we take that first breath of air, we have been raised with Christ.”

The ancient Hebrew texts are full of this imagery of coming out of water to new life. Noah and the ark, Hebrews passing through the Red Sea and the Jordan river to new life in the land that God has promised them, and the story of Jonah and his adventures in the belly of a large water creature.

Sam Adams continues, “There’s one sense of the Jewish practice of baptism...that takes the convert to Judaism into the waters of the Jordan with the people of Israel, and then up and out onto the other side into the promised land. In such a way the gentile convert identifies with the story of Israel. Israel’s story becomes their story. The life in bondage to slavery is in the past, and the life ahead is with Israel in the future of promise.

In a similar way, for the early Christians baptism was the identification with Jesus, with his story.” Baptism was and is an act of symbolically leaving the former things behind – passing through death (the water baptism) and emerging free and new into a new life. “For those of us who have been baptized, it is a practice in our lives that joins us to the story of Jesus.”

So, when I think of Jesus saying, “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit.” I think of this – putting aside the stuff, the actions and behaviors and ways of thinking that are hurtful to ourselves and our relationships – laying aside these vestments – the clothing of death, and stepping into the unknown chaos that is the spirit of God.

In some early church baptisms, the candidate literally stripped out of their clothing, was baptized and when they stepped out, they were dressed by the community of believers in new clean clothes signifying the new self that emerges out of the waters of baptism.

In Colossians 3:9-11: Paul writes, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourself with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal (the act of baptism) there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; [in other words, there is no “ism” that can separate us anymore because] Christ is all and in all.” In the same way, Jesus describes the spirit like the wind – or like breath.

That first breath we take when we are born from our mother’s womb inflates our lungs and provides oxygen to all the processes that require it. It is the breath of life. Likewise, when we are born of the spirit – that first breath after we have “come through the waters” and “put to death the things of the

world” is the first breath of new life. This is being born again – being born from above – this is taking in the spirit of God and letting it into every pore.

Jesus invites us into deeper relationship – always. Like Nicodemus we are encouraged to ask questions, to come as we are to the table. Christ invites us to lay it all down – all our regrets, our sins, our fears – thoughts, actions, behaviors that hurt us and hurt others – lay it all down – examine what is of God and what isn’t – and that which cannot and does not lead to a deeper relationship with God and our neighbour is put to death. This is what I believe Jesus means when he says we have to be born from water – to emerge from the chaos of repentance, of putting our old sins behind us regardless of whether we have actually been baptized and breathing in the cool grace and mercy of new life in Christ.

“God has, in Jesus Christ, entered our existence, judged it, crucified it, and constituted a new humanity into which we have been graciously placed. We are no longer in Adam, but we are now in Christ, the second Adam. In Christ, one humanity has been replaced with another.

When we breathe in God’s spirit – we become new creations. Paul reminds the Christians in Colossians 3:12-17, to “take up, or clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe themselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

Rebirth in the Kingdom of God can happen once, or many times a day. I truly believe that God doesn’t hold a tally at how many times a day or a lifetime we are born of water and spirit – from above. The point isn’t the amount of times, or even the specifics of the event. The point is that every time – even if we come to Christ at night - we are invited to come and see. Jesus shows us always – throughout the gospels, that God is a God of life, of redemption, repentance and resurrection.

When we are – sometimes daily - born up from the water and into the spirit, we are claiming the love that God so freely offers through our relationship with Christ. And this love cannot leave us unchanged. Through Christ we are a new creation.

As a global church – even here at Menno – us gathering together to pray and be a living community together – makes a statement to the world that we are a people of life in the Spirit. And our gathering together as a community of believers confessing Christ alive in us joins us to the multitude who have come before and will come after us who have travailed the waters and come out a new creation.

Today, us gathering here is making a statement to the world that the things that make for death are not welcome here. All that condemns the other and that uses violence thinly veiled as preservation and protectionism thwart God’s command to care justly for the orphans, widows and immigrants in our midst.

By being born up from the water and into the spirit we are placing our hope in the mystery that is our God. We say yes to breathing in the goodness of God who raised Jesus from the grave, and who still raises us out of the waters of death and chaos, and into the resurrected community of the Spirit.