

“Born from above”

“For years, the opening of ‘The Wide World of Sports’ television program illustrated ‘the agony of defeat’ with a painful ending to an attempted ski jump. The skier appeared in good form as he headed down the jump, but then, for no apparent reason, he tumbled head over heels off the side of the jump, bouncing off the supporting structure down to the snow below.

What viewers didn’t know was that he chose to fall rather than finish the jump. Why? As he explained later, the jump surface had become too fast, and midway down the ramp, he realized if he completed the jump, he would land on the level ground, beyond the safe sloping landing area, which could have been fatal. Surprisingly, the skier suffered no more than a headache from the tumble.”

After sharing that information, the staff of Sermons.com suggest, “To change one’s course in life can be a dramatic and sometimes painful undertaking, but change is better than a fatal landing at the end.” (sermons.com staff)

Today’s Gospel Lectionary Reading reports a conversation about **change** between Jesus and Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, the religious authorities in Jerusalem. The synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not mention Nicodemus. Evidently, because he was part of the Sanhedrin, the Jerusalem Council, Nicodemus sought Jesus out during the night to keep the other religious leaders from being aware of his visit. He recognized Jesus was sent by God but he was not prepared to allow the rest of the Sanhedrin to know of his admiration of this shocking and amazing rabbi.

Under the cover of darkness, Nicodemus engaged Jesus in a conversation. I suspect Nicodemus initiated the discussion using the Greek language, so any passerby would not understand what they were talking about, and thus, would not be able to report what they said to other members of the Sanhedrin. Indeed, in order for this scene to make sense, their dialogue had to take place in Greek. We know it was possible for them to have such a discussion because the official language of the Jerusalem Council, the Sanhedrin, was Greek. Being a member of that group of leaders, Nicodemus, obviously had command of the Greek language. Further, the Scriptures report Jesus communicated with the members of the Sanhedrin, during at least, one of their meetings, so, it is highly likely Jesus, when it was appropriate, talked to others in Greek. Nicodemus’ misunderstanding of what Jesus meant only makes sense, if he and Jesus were talking in Greek, for only the Greek language used the same word to mean either **“again”** or **“from above”**. Part of the change Nicodemus needed was liberation from the rigid and concrete ideology of the leaders of the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law, so he could be **“born from above”**!

After Nicodemus began the conversation by acknowledging God had sent Jesus, **“Jesus answered, ‘I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born from above.’”** Unfortunately, some translations of the Bible have reported Jesus told Nicodemus he needed to be **“born again”**, instead of **“born from above.”** Such misinterpretations indicate the same type of philosophy or legalistic approach toward life and God, which was prevalent among the religious elite of Jesus’ day. Or, at the least, some folks with such concerns in more recent times have used that mistranslation to justify demanding a **“true Christian”** be able to identify the exact moment when he or she was converted. **“Are you ‘born again’?”** has become the test question of modern religious Pharisees.

Nicodemus was still in bondage to the way of thinking exemplified by the legalist adversaries of Jesus, so he was very confused when our Lord used the Greek word, which could mean **“again”** or **“from above”**. Jesus explained Nicodemus needed a transformation from his way of living or understanding – to be born to a far different approach – **to the way of God’s Spirit**.

Nicodemus’ words revealed his confusion and bondage to legalistic and concrete thinking. **“How can a grown man be born again?” Nicodemus asked. ‘He certainly cannot enter his mother’s womb and be born a second time!’”**

Jesus worked to liberate Nicodemus’ understanding by explaining, **“I am telling you the truth that no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. A person is born physically of human parents, but is born spiritually of the Spirit. Do not be surprised because I tell you that you must all be born from above. The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. It is like that with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”**

Neither you nor I can control how someone is **“born from above”**! That makes one very uncomfortable, if you want to always be in charge – controlling the thinking and actions of other folks. It is therefore, understandable that the religious elite, the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees, and especially those on the Sanhedrin were uncomfortable with what God was doing through Jesus.

Johnny Dean provides insight into this dynamic – the uncontrollable nature of being **“born of the Spirit”** – **“born from above”**, by sharing his own experience, saying, “I remember growing up in the South, in cotton country, in the summer, before air conditioning became something almost every home had. Several of those summers I spent working on my uncle’s cotton farm, down in the Mississippi delta, just outside of my birthplace, Cleveland, Mississippi. It was hot work, hard work, bringing in a cotton crop. It still is, but technology has made it a lot easier than it was back then.”

Dean continues, “When the crop had been tended for another day, the weeds chopped from between the cotton plants, in the evening everyone would gather on the front porch. We would rock and talk and laugh in a futile attempt to escape the ever-present heat and humidity. And sometimes, on a really good day, the leaves of the trees would begin to rustle. And the conversation would die down,

and everyone would just sit back and enjoy the summer breeze, the gift of the breeze. We didn't know where it came from. We didn't know where it was going. But we knew it was there, because we could feel it." (Johnny Dean, www.Sermons.com)

"How can this be?" asked Nicodemus. He was dumbfounded and could not comprehend the source of such a dramatic transformation – change!

Jesus revealed, **"As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."** When Moses led the Israelites, during their forty years of journeying in the wilderness, many turned away from God. The people interpreted their hardships and sufferings as God's punishment for such rebellion. One example of such punishment was the experience of many being bitten by snakes and then dying. The people repented and Moses took their plea for deliverance from the snakes to the Almighty. God's response was to instruct Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole, so when someone was bitten, he or she would turn to God and receive the Lord's mercy and healing when they looked upon the bronze snake. In a like manner, Jesus told Nicodemus, it would be by God's Son being **"lifted up"** – referring to his crucifixion – so we can see it is God's Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love which makes us citizens of God's Kingdom, who live **"eternal life"**!

Bill Bouknight provides insight into what believing – looking to and living for Jesus Christ means about the way we live our lives. Bouknight discloses, "The great baseball manager Leo Durocher was once asked who was the all-time favorite player he had coached. Lots of people were shocked when he named Dusty Rhodes. Rhodes was a little known pinch hitter, not a really big name player. Durocher was asked, 'What was so special about Dusty Rhodes?' He replied, 'In a tight game when I looked down the bench for a pinch hitter, some players would avert their gaze and refuse to look in my direction. But Dusty Rhodes would look me right in the eye, smile, and tap on his bat.' He was always available."

Bouknight concludes, **"New birth is more likely to happen to persons who make themselves available to God."** (Bill Bouknight, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com)

Jesus then elaborated and said to Nicodemus, **"For God loved the world so much that He gave His Only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to be its Judge, but to be its Savior."**

Kathryn Matthews Huey affirms God's motive for sending the **"Only Son"** and explains, "The why of what God is doing, the gift of Jesus, the gift of new life, it all comes from love.

But love only works in relationship. Which, interestingly, brings us back to belief. Marcus Borg says that we've lost the original meaning of belief – remember 'credo' – 'I believe'? According to Borg, 'credo' doesn't mean, 'I agree with these intellectual statements,' because its root words really mean, **"I give my heart to."** And the word 'belief', before our modern, scientific age, wasn't about statements or propositions – it was directed toward a person: to hold dear, to prize, to commit oneself to that person, to be in a relationship with that person whom we trust. Borg says, **"Most simply, to believe meant to love. Indeed the English words believe and believe are related. What we believe is what we love. Faith is about loving God"** (*The God We Never Knew*)."

Huey suggests, "If belief, if faith is really a matter of the heart, the answers aren't up here, in our heads. And what really matters, more than our words or claims or creeds or arguments or even our theology books and seminary degrees, is a love that can't be measured or restricted, contained or boxed in," – Huey concludes – **"a love that can't be held back or kept away by us from any of God's children – God's own love for the world that was so great that only God's beloved, beloved child was a good enough gift for such a beloved world."** (Sermon Seeds, *Sample sermon on John 3:1-21* by Kathryn Matthews Huey)

How then are we to respond to Jesus' call to be **"born from above"**, **"to believe"** in God's **"Only Son"**, and to live **"eternal life"** – the life of the citizens of God's Kingdom? Richard E. Gribble provides us some important insight, indicating, "We need to be able to look into a mirror and not only see, but fully believe, that the reflection we view is a child of God. We need to believe in ourselves and we can with the assistance of another." Gribble continues, "A good example of such transformation is found in the story of Dulcinea, one of the principal characters in the popular Broadway musical, *Man of La Mancha*. The audience learns that Don Quixote, the chief protagonist, lives with many illusions, most especially his idea that he is a knight errant who battles dragons in the form of windmills. At the end of the play as he lays dying, Don Quixote has at his side a prostitute, Aldonza, whom he has called throughout the play Dulcinea - Sweet One - much to the laughter of the local townsfolk. But Don Quixote has loved her in a way unlike she has ever experienced. When Quixote breathes his last Aldonza begins to sing 'The Impossible Dream.' As the echo of the song dies away, someone shouts to her, 'Aldonza!' But she pulls away proudly and responds, 'My name is Dulcinea.'" Gribble concludes, **"The crazy knight's love had transformed her."** (Richard E. Gribble, *Sermons for Sundays: In Lent And Easter: Building Our Foundation On God*, CSS Publishing Company)

God's Self-Giving, Suffering, Sacrificial, Forgiving, Welcoming, Reconciling, and Healing Love – demonstrated – embodied in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is what **transforms you and me!** God's "Agape" Love is what enables us to be led by the Holy Spirit to the New Life in Christ – to be **"born from above"**! **Loving God back by loving one another and all people with God's "Agape" Love is what believing – faith is all about.** Don't make Jesus your **"Judge"** by being a modern Pharisee because Jesus sets us free to be **"born from above"** and he is your and my **"Savior"**! **Live your faith – be "born from above"!** Amen.