John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ 4Nicodemus 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?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 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.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

‘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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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.

‘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.

‘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.

Jesus Teaches the Three Rs

How many of you have heard the pot roast story? A young woman moves away from her parents into her own apartment. Before long she starts to miss home cooking, so on her next visit home she decides to learn how to cook a few dishes. One of her favorite recipes was Pot Roast. So she asks her mother to show her how to cook one. The mother tells her to salt and pepper the meat well and to make sure the vegetables are all cut the same size. Just before the mom places the roast in the pan, she picks up a knife and cuts about a ¼ of an inch of roast from each end. Then she places the meat in the pan. The daughter stops her mom. “Mom, I understand why we cut the vegetables the same size, and I know the reason we salt and pepper the meat, but why did you cut a little bit off each end of the roast before you placed it in the pan?” “Because that’s what you do”, said the mom. “But why?” asked the daughter. “Does it help it cook better?” “Well,” said the mother, “I do it this way, because that’s the way my mother taught me, but I’m not really sure why. Next time we go to visit we’ll ask her.”

Several months later the family gathers at Grandma’s house for dinner. As grandma prepares the meal the mother and daughter are in the kitchen with her. The daughter asks her grandmother, “Grandma, you’re such a good cook, and I know you passed down your skills to Mom, but I can’t figure out why we cut the ends off of the pot roast before we cook it.” The grandmother turned to her granddaughter and said, “What are you talking about? I don’t cut the ends off before I cook it.” At this point the mother interjects, “Yes you do! The time you showed me how to make pot roast, you started to put it in the pan, and then you put the roast back on the cutting board and cut about a 1/4 inch off each end of the roast. I’ve been doing it that way ever since.” The grandmother stared at her daughter in amazement. “Every time you cook a pot roast you cut a ¼ inch off the ends? Every single time?” “Yes!” She answered her mother. “Every single time, just like you showed me.” “Honey, the only time I ever cut the ends off the roast is if it’s too big for the pan!”

We are creatures of habit. There was no reason for this mother to ever stop cutting the ends off of her pot roasts, because every time she prepared it that way it tasted great, and why spoil a good thing? The same principle applies to religion. There are time-honored traditions in every religion, and some have great value. But sometimes we continue a ritual and refuse to consider any other course of action. But what happens when someone new comes along, who does things differently, who doesn’t do things the way you were taught to do things? Do you insist on doing things the way you’ve always done them, or do you consider trying something new?

This is the dilemma that faced Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, a religious leader of his people, and his people were by in large religious. Nicodemus had studied the Law of God that had been handed down from his daddy, and his daddy had learned it from his daddy who in turn had learned it from his daddy, and so forth. The Law was sacred to the Jewish people, and Nicodemus was a legal expert. But the Law was just a civil matter; the law was HOLY. God had given the Jews his sacred law for a reason. God had saved these people from slavery and the people wanted to keep God around. And God had said that the way you do that is you keep my Covenant Laws. Hence Nicodemus had the important task of interpreting the Laws in such a way that God’s presence would remain with the people.

The problem for Nicodemus was that he realized that something wasn’t working. As hard as he tried himself to obey the Laws to the best of his professional ability, he did not sense God’s presence. In all his zeal, in all his passion to keep the Law, Nicodemus did not sense God’s presence. This is what brought him to Jesus one night, and that night, I believed, changed the direction of his life, the same way that Jesus changes the direction of our lives. What Nicodemus yearned for most of all was to dwell in God’s presence; the first thing he says to Jesus is, “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.” In other words, “you have something that I want, which is to dwell in God’s presence.” Jesus picks up on this pretty quick and answers bluntly, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

And Nicodemus has a hard time getting his mind around this, as we so often have a hard time with it: How can we be born from above? How can we be born of the Spirit? The problem that Nicodemus has, and the problem that we have, is that we can’t birth ourselves. How many of us decided when we would be born? Did we just say to ourselves, “It’s getting a little cramped in here. It sure would be nice to see some sunshine, find out what baby food tastes like, start crawling around a little.” No, we can no more birth ourselves than we can reconcile ourselves to God. This is where Nicodemus and many of us struggle. We are so task-oriented, we keep asking ourselves what we have to do to gain access to God. And the answer Jesus gives is not very helpful; you have to be born of the Spirit. Our next question is, “How do we do that?” And the answer is we don’t; God does that.

We don’t give ourselves to God; we simply have to accept that we already belong to him. We like to have the illusion of control. Organized religion does this by proclaiming that there are things we must do to be acceptable to God. This is what Nicodemus and the Pharisees and the Sadducees had been trying to do, and it is what many Christians try to do today. But Jesus explains that “the wind blows where it will, and we hear the sound of it, be we don’t know where it comes from and where it goes.” He’s describing life in the Spirit, and you have to admit, it sounds frightening, just to let God blow you around like a dandelion seed. But isn’t that truly the way life is? How much control do we really have over our lives? We can exercise daily, eat a healthy diet, practice good hygiene, wear a football helmet when we drive, but we can’t cheat death. Jesus is just stating the obvious; we depend upon God for everything.

So Jesus explains this to Nicodemus – we must be born from above, or God must birth us from above. And when God births us, three things happen.

First, God reconciles us to him. A chasm exists between God and us. It’s the same chasm that Isaiah recognized in today’s Old Testament reading. I’m sure Isaiah was a fine citizen, probably was an eagle scout of great moral fiber, yet when he found himself in the presence of God, his first reaction was to say, “Woe is me; I am a man of unclean lips.” He saw himself as unworthy of God, and God takes the initiative by sending the seraph to him with a hot coal to cleanse his lips. We can do nothing to reconcile ourselves to God. We don’t have the capacity. As hard as Nicodemus tried to obey the Law to the best of his ability and knowledge, as hard as we may try to be good – to attend church, and help with Project Hospitality and the Cranberry Festival and give to all the right charities – we cannot by our own ability be reconciled with God. What’s worse is that we end up making matters worse by trying; the more we try to do it ourselves, the more frustrated we get, and then we get angry with God who we blame for burdening us with a task that we can’t possibly achieve, and we get angry with ourselves for not being able to achieve it, and we get angry with other for noticing that we’re not able to achieve it, and you’ve got hostility towards God, towards ourselves, and toward others.

The good news is that God is not hostile toward us. In fact he wants us to be reconciled to him. In fact he does reconcile us to him. You didn’t reconcile yourself any more than you “borned” yourself. God has done it. Simply accept it; accept yourself, accept others, and accept the fact that God has accepted you. He created you to love you and to have a relationship with you, and when we fell down and couldn’t get up, he picked us up. He has reconciled us.

But being reconciled is only a part of being born from above. We also need to be reunited with God, and this is where Jesus comes into the picture. Reconciled means that there is no enmity between us; there is no longer a canyon between us and God, but we were not simply created to peacefully co-exist with God and others, like Pakistan co-exists with India, like Iran coexists with Israel, like labor unions coexist with business owners. We need to be reunited with God as well. Reconciliation makes reunion possible, but only in Christ is reunion accomplished, because in Jesus Christ there was never a break in the unity between himself and God, between himself and humanity, and between himself and himself – he was not plagued with all the guilt and shame and hostility that we are plagued with. In Jesus we find the union that was never broken. Christ keeps us united with God. And when we know we are united with God, we are united with ourselves, “not in pride and false self-satisfaction, but in a deep self-acceptance as something which is eternally important, eternally loved, eternally accepted.”[[1]](#footnote-1) And as the disgust at one’s self, the hatred of one’s self disappears, so does the disgust and hatred for others. We become truly healed creatures, united with God, with self, and with others. Jesus Christ accomplishes this in us. And the Church, the body of Christ, this union is confessed and realized, even though at times that union is stressed, distorted and broken.

The third mark of the New Creation is resurrection. Resurrection is not an event that might happen sometime down the road, but it happens when we are born from above. Resurrection happens now. We die to self; we rise in Christ and to eternal life in God.

I pray that you would find the peace and joy and thrill of life led by the Spirit of God. May that same Spirit sustain you and guide you through all of life’s travails. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

1. Paul Tillich, *The New Being,* found online at <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=375&C=15> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)