

II Lent 2005  
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This isn't the only time we hear of Nicodemus in John's Gospel, though it is the first, and John is the only Gospel in which this conversation, so central to the Christian message, occurs. We are given two more glimpses of Nicodemus in John; the next just a few chapters later, when the religious leaders decide to arrest Jesus on a rumor, Nicodemus asks that at least Jesus be given a hearing, holding his colleagues to live up to their own lawful practices. Then there is one more glimpse, long ahead, of Nicodemus at the burial of Jesus, there with Joseph of Arimathea, with spices to prepare the body for burial. We are to understand that Nicodemus "has been on a journey from baffled questioner to legal defender to disciple. The Holy Spirit has been working in him. He has, over the course of Jesus' ministry, come to [a new place of faith.] Nicodemus had been born from above, a spiritual rebirth." (Beth Ernest, in *Synthesis*)

We don't know what drew Nicodemus to Jesus that first night, except perhaps a hunger he couldn't quite name. He had heard of Jesus' works and a bit of his teachings; but Nicodemus had a comfortable life, a successful life. He was prominent in the community, a person of responsibility and trust. He must, though, have come to one of those moments when one asks, 'is this all there is?' And sought out Jesus.

We never get to hear the rest of the details of the story. But it is clear that something was at work in Nicodemus, some seed planted by Jesus that grew as the years passed. Something that moved him from 'baffled questioner to disciple.'

This is just a nifty story, really, a wonderfully terse and yet rich story, and it's a shame, to me, that these central passages in John's explication of the Christian faith have been co-opted by a particular branch of Christianity, who have turned it from a tale of incredible grace into a story of *measurement*, into a litmus test for whether or not one believes enough, or believes in the right way, to garner salvation. You know—I wanted to come to this pulpit this morning with a sign to hold up, reading only "John 3:16." That kind of Christianity. With the attendant pressure to trot out a 'born again' experience, the push for unquestioning belief.

Because the process of being born 'from above' that Jesus describes, isn't something the believer does at all, really—it is a grace gift from God that leads to new life, rich life, abundant life, life with a capital L, right down to one's toes. It seems odd to me that this whole passage, so inviting, so universal, should have been captured by a brand of Christians who use it to promote exclusivity. If anything, Nicodemus is the patron saint of the questioner, the model for emerging trust and following, the clue to how our sense of emptiness itself isn't necessarily the absence of God, but is perhaps the aroma that reaches us and makes our stomach growl, to tell us the banquet awaits our participation.

Psychologist William R. Miller conducted a fifteen-year study of a phenomenon he calls 'Quantum Change.' He describes quantum change as "a vivid, surprising, benevolent, and enduring personal transformation." (*Spirituality and Health*, February 2005) Some of these changes, he says, begin inwardly, 'insightful, an 'aha' that leaves a person almost breathless, and confident of a new truth and a new way of thinking.' I wonder if Nicodemus' quantum change from questioner to disciple was that kind of

change, that one day he finally ‘got it’ about who Jesus was and what he offered to Nicodemus’ stale life.

The other kind of quantum change, Miller says, is the mystical sort, the sense of being knocked over—like the change St. Paul describes on the road to Damascus. This kind comes clearly from the outside of one, might involve a vision or a dramatic break with the old identity and a shift to a new one.

Both of these kind of quantum changes, though, have common traits. They tend to “impart a mysterious and enduring sense of peacefulness; both mark the beginning of lasting and often pervasive changes in a person’s life; both involve significant alteration in how one perceives other people, the world, oneself, and the relationships among these aspects of life.

These changes, for some, may come at a breaking point or crisis. In other cases, a deep discrepancy in the inner person resolves itself. Still others may be a stage of maturation. In every case, the changer described, to Miller, a sense of the touch of grace, and often some kind of encounter with the sacred. These changes take years, sometimes, to come to integration, but happen fairly compactly, over minutes, or hours or a few days.

I don’t know about you, but this kind of change sounds a lot to me like being ‘born from above’, born again, born of the Spirit rather than only the flesh, born to a new life instead of the pushing for prestige, power and influence of the old way of living.

Our friends in 12-step programs might call this change a ‘spiritual awakening’ as a result of pursuing health and wholeness along the steps to sobriety and serenity.

Not everyone has such ‘quantum change’ in their lives. It is something that can’t be manipulated or contrived; the kind of life shift that happens in such a change isn’t called for in every life, perhaps.

But being born ‘from above’ is open for everyone, I believe; the spiritual journey toward God, toward a life of values centered on trying to know God and to follow God’s Way of love is a journey any human being can begin and continue. The only requirement is the one that brought Nicodemus to Jesus in the dark of the night of his own emptiness, the one that propels the alcoholic into recovery, the one that brings new commitment to a relationship in danger of falling into estrangement: a decision. Nicodemus decided to go see this Jesus of whom he had heard. He decided to move away from his own comfortable life into the life of meaningful but difficult discipleship. Over the course of time, he decided to follow Jesus.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian said this “A decision joins us to the eternal. It brings what is eternal into time. A decision raises us with a shock from the slumber of monotony. A decision breaks the magic spell of custom. A decision breaks the long row of weary thoughts. A decision pronounces its blessing upon even the weakest beginning, as long as it is a real beginning. Decision is the awakening to the eternal.”

The road to the new life is open to every one of us, to any one who wants to come fully alive in Christ (and that’s the only place to come to this renewal.) But it asks of us that we overcome the lethargy of life-as-usual, the comfort of things-as-we’ve-always-known-them-to-be, the familiar haunts of dissatisfaction in pursuit of a life that is, paradoxically, free for the taking and incredibly costly. It asks of us, instead of clinging desperately to what we know, to move confidently into an unknown future.

Abraham managed it, over the lifetime of his old age. He decided to trust God, pack up his belongings and leave the life he knew to head for nothing but God's promise. St. Paul knew it, when he got up blind from the ground below his horse and moved not to despair but curiosity and then conviction. And it worked its leaven in Nicodemus, as he grew over the years from questioner to defender to disciple.

Maybe you've been graced with a quantum change in your life, and know what it is to have your values and your commitments reordered by a dramatic event. Or maybe you have made that decision to make room for God's life to grow in you and are knowing, now the fruits of that life as it continues to take you down strange alleys and roads you couldn't have imagined. [It's a lifelong journey, you know; we don't ever really 'arrive' on this side.] Maybe what I'm talking about might as well be Swahili to you, or Greek, or some strange language. If that's the case, I invite you to a conversation, to a chance to deepen your life, to ground it in the Spirit, which will take you to places you can't imagine and ask of you things you will be glad to give.

It's not about securing your salvation—that's already been done, by the love of God in Christ Jesus. But it is a chance to begin to live life new, abundant and deep.