

**“One Diverse Family (The Challenge for Nicodemus)” based on John 3:1-21, Genesis 12:1-3
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on March 5, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

John 3:1-21: Now, there was man from among the Pharisees. He was called Nicodemus, a leader of the Judeans. He went to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we recognize that you have come from God, for no one is able to do these signs that you do, if God were not with him."

Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone is not born from above, they are not able to see the Kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said to him, "How is a person who is aged able to be born? He is not able to be to go into the womb of his mother a second time to be born."

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone is not born of water and the Spirit, they are not able to enter into the Kingdom of God. What has been born of flesh is flesh. And what has been born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel because I said this to you. It is necessary for you all to be born from above. The Spirit blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it. However, you do not know from where it comes and where it goes. Thus, it is for all who have been born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus answered and said to him, "How are these things able to come about?"

Jesus answered and said to him, "You are the teacher of Israel and you do not know these things? Truly, truly, I say to you: Because we see, we speak, and what we have seen, we bear witness to, and our witness you all do not receive. If I have told you earthly things, and you do not believe, how, if I tell you heavenly things, will you believe?"

"No one has ascended into heaven, if not the one having descended from heaven, the Son of Man. As Moses lifted high the serpent in the wilderness, thus it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted high, in order that everyone having faith in him will possess life eternal.

"For in this manner, God so loved the world, that he gave the Son, the only begotten, in order that everyone having faith in him might not be destroyed but might instead have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world in order that he might judge the world, but in order that the world might be saved on account of him. The one having faith in him is not judged.

But the one not having faith, has already been judged because he has not had faith in the name of the only begotten Son of God. Now this is the judgement, because the light has come into the world and people loved the darkness, rather than the light, for their deeds were evil. For all who are practicing evil hate the light in order that their works might not be exposed. However, the one creating truth comes to the light, in order that their works may be made visible because they have been performed in God."

"Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

This extremely famous quote from Ferris Bueller's Day Off came to my mind, as I realized that it was nearly two years ago already, when Claire and the kids left for Asheville without me, to spend Easter with her family, while I stayed in Absecon, New Jersey to do my second online-only Holy Week.

It was during that time that I discovered the show, "The Chosen." And so, I was watching it all week, and on the plane, on my way here to visit Shelby Presbyterian Church for the first time to interview with your nominating committee. At that point, the show was in its first season, and its cast was all people I'd never seen before, though some now have gone on to other roles.

Except one, Erick Avari, the man who plays Nicodemus, and his acting captivated me. You may not know Eric Avari by name or any one role, but trust me, you know his face, from his dozens and dozens of smaller roles as a character actor. But in "The Chosen," he really stands out as Nicodemus, an often misunderstood and quickly passed over character. This Web series really makes us look around, and try to imagine the world around Jesus.

To adapt that Ferris Bueller line, let me say also that John's gospel moves pretty fast also. And so, if we don't stop and look around once in a while, we could miss something. And so, like The Chosen, I want us to stop here in this passage and look around. As you know, I love translation and looking at the Greek and Hebrew texts.

To be clear, almost every English translation we have today is great, reliable, and trustworthy for knowing and loving God. However, translating fresh from the Greek and Hebrew, allows us to move more slowly in the text, and look around, so we don't miss things. If the scripture is familiar to you, I want things to stand out.

One of those things is Jesus's words to Nicodemus, the phrase, "born from above." We often encounter this translated as "born again." This is an accurate interpretation. Just like today, when we start something over, we might say, "take it from the top." In the common Greek of Jesus's time this was an expression very similar. But over the years, "born again," has taken on a lot of meanings, and we have a hard time hearing it as Nicodemus might have or more importantly, as John's readers might have.

You see, in ancient times, birthright was essential to an ordered society. The triumph of the human individual that we celebrate in our culture today, was unimaginable in the ancient world – you were born into your way of life. By birth, your rights, your status, your language, and your faith, were all preset, depending on gender and birth order. Some might break free and change their station in life, like the Roman Cato who went from working class to Senator, but largely, these things were hereditary only.

And so, to say that to see the Kingdom of God, to see the new ruling order of the world, you must be born from above, is to indicate that there is a different hereditary order. Nicodemus does what any good rabbi might – He eliminates the strangest option, asking, "You don't mean born again physically do you?" This allows Jesus to agree with Nicodemus, clarifying that this birth from above is by water and Spirit, meaning it is by baptism and the presence of God.

The marveling that Jesus cautions against is not because Nicodemus doesn't understand, but because Nicodemus likely recognizes immediately what Jesus means by this – Everyone, every Jew and the gentiles of every single nation can be reborn this way. Jesus tells him that the hereditary birth, the birth of flesh, is just flesh. The systems it continues are not what matter in the Kingdom of God. But the birth of the Spirit is Spirit. It is the presence of God, the breath and life of God welling up within a person, and you can't stop the Spirit from reaching out. It goes even to those you might think are unworthy of it.

Nicodemus wants to know: How will this come about? how will God's Kingdom expand? Jesus says, "You are a teacher of Israel and you do not know?" If I were really going to translate this into our modern English, I might say, "Wait. You teach scripture and yet you do not know what scripture says?" Jesus then cites two scriptures: Proverbs 30 and Numbers 21.

The first, he uses to establish who he is as the Son of God. In Proverbs 30, it says "who has ascended to heaven or descended? Who gathers wind in his fists? Who has wrapped waters in

his garment? Surely you know his name, and you know his son's name." Jesus establishes his identity with this verse.

The second, shows God doing a strange thing – ordering Moses to make a graven image. It seems at first that God is violating the second commandment God gave Moses. Just as there is a challenge in calling Jesus the Son of God to a mono-theistic faith that centers on there being only One God, so too, in a faith that strictly prohibits worshiping images, it was hard to understand why Moses made a snake, hanged it on a cross and held it up high for the people, and when they looked upon it, they were healed.

And so, by stopping in the text and looking around a little, we see a little more. We see that Jesus presents Nicodemus with a challenge of understanding that the hereditary status of the Jews is not what God seeks here, nor the status of power the Roman rulers have over the Jewish people. The challenge is that the Son of God, fully One with the One and Only God, is sitting across the table from Nicodemus that night, and he says that he will be lifted high as the snake was so that all who believe, or literally, have faith, in *him*, will then have perpetual life.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that the way of the Kingdom is not the way of the world, and that it is not what you are born into and who the world says you are, but what you believe, or more accurately, what you put your trust in, what you are faithful to.

This is the set up for the famous verse of John 3:16, which is familiar in and out of the church. *"For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."* This is the typical way this verse is translated, with sometimes begotten, being changed to "one and only" or "first-born" Son. This verse holds a lot of meaning to many of us, perhaps even you or someone you know, came to faith, or was restored, through it. It's beautiful and translation is good.

Yet I hope it stood out to you when I read the translation this morning, which went, *"For in this manner, God so loved the world, that he gave the Son, the only begotten, in order that everyone having faith in him might not be destroyed but might instead have eternal life."* The first thing I'll point to is that it does not say, "His Son." It's implied, but literally in the Greek it says, "the Son," which, with "only begotten," points back to John 1:18, where even though many translations insert Son again by implication, John actually calls Jesus, "the only begotten God."

I believe John wants the readers to see that Jesus is God in our flesh, the true temple, sharing in our humanity, to live as we live, be lifted high on that cross for our redemption through his death, only to rise again and in doing so, make us temples for God's Spirit to dwell. When we are reborn to share in God's work in Christ in this world, we share in what Paul called the "Ministry of Reconciliation."

The next part to consider is the word "believe," which in Greek is the same word for faith. This word is not a mere intellectual ascent, that you accept in your head this idea. I might believe that eating too much is bad for my health, but I may not always live like it. I may believe that oil is a finite resource, but I buy things made from plastic and drive a car that runs on gas. We can

believe something and be a contradiction. But faith is more – it is a belief carried by trust, it is allegiance, and it is faithfulness or commitment. It is not certainty but trusting just the same.

When we focus too much on believe, as we use the term in our modern language, and not its older connotation to “hold dear” or even “to love,” we miss something. At the time of the King James, it had come to mean, “persuaded of the truth,” a meaning that straddles the older, “hold dear,” and the modern, “know.” In other words, it was more like “trust” than just intellectual ascent. This is why I say the translations are all good, even if we need to unmask things. This is important because we tend in our modern context to have religious add-ons to believe.

By this I mean, “that whosoever believes in him, AND is Roman Catholic, AND Protestant, AND Presbyterian, AND is Baptist.” Or we say, “believes in him AND doesn’t drink, or chew, or run with girls who do.” Or maybe, “believes in him AND has the right political party, philosophy, or purity – the purity that matters most to me.”

No, the verse says, whosoever has faith, whosoever trusts, whosoever places their allegiance in Him, the only begotten God, that is who will not perish. That is who will not be destroyed, but instead have eternal life. This is not about perfect doctrine, and it’s not to say we shouldn’t strive for right doctrine. It’s not about a sinless resume, and it’s not to say we should go on sinning. It’s not about the status of flesh, but about trusting in God, who came down to us, and remains with us in the Holy Spirit, residing in us and among us.

Indeed, the Son was not sent in order that he might judge or condemn the world, but that it might be saved on account of him, because of *who he is*, and *what he has done*. And so, if we look back to Nicodemus and the frame his question sits within, and we look ahead, to next week when Jesus goes to Samaria next, we can understand that the world here, is not simply the globe, or some philosophical option, but it means all the peoples of the world, the many nations, the many tribes, that God promised would be blessed. As we’ve studied over the last few weeks, this blessing is being brought close to God through Abraham and his descendants, who would bear God’s light to them. This is what Jesus speaks to.

He is not speaking of a heavenly Kingdom that mimics the Persian, Roman, or Greek empires, which conquered to force the minority cultures to be like the majority culture with the intent of subduing many nations to make one nation. No, the Kingdom we see in John’s Revelation is many nations worshiping Jesus, peoples with different cultures and customs, ideologies and philosophies, even different economic policies and political arrangements, are united by the Spirit through faith in the one True God, revealed as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Jesus. This is a multi-national, multi-ethnic vision that the church is meant to embody.

Sisters and brothers, it is important we don’t just go quickly through scripture, especially those passages most familiar to us, because we just might miss something. When we stop and ponder these scriptures in their context, from where they are placed in the text, to when they were written, to which culture they were written, in what language as well, then we have the opportunity to see more and engage the Holy Spirit which is dynamic and active.

This could be a book, but I hope what I've shared today will help you ponder the radical reality of John 3:16. Indeed, God so loved the world – the nations and peoples of the world in all their diversity – that he sent the Son – the eternal Son, begotten outside of time and space, one with the Father and Spirit, who shared in our humanity, lived as we lived and died for us – so anyone who has faith in him – who trusts and holds him dear – might not perish or be destroyed, but have life eternal.

As we go forth, let us remember that, as Jesus pointed out, we have an incredible ability to judge ourselves by ignoring the light of Jesus and clinging to darkness without him. When we look out on the world and see different faces, different places, and different ways that people have in seeking who Jesus truly is, remember that God's love is for them too, and our job is not to bring them to the ANDs that we add, but to share in the ministry of reconciliation, Our job is to help people to encounter Jesus first in us and then through the scriptures.

The promise to Abraham was one big diverse family, a unity in community, of all nations, sharing in his faith, in his trust and reliance on the one True God he encountered. God's plan is a diverse church of men and women, people of every ethnicity, every economic status, every identity, every political persuasion, because the world is loved, and all are within reach. This is God's love for the world expressed in Jesus.

It is challenging to Nicodemus and to us, and Jesus immediately puts it into action when he and the disciples go to the despised Samaritans right after. In our devotional for this week, the challenge is to share this love of God with someone who does not believe, but to do so, without actively trying to convert that person to Jesus. Why would we do that? Because we want them to encounter him, first through seeing love in action. Can we trust God to do the rest?

For this is what John says later in chapter 13, "By this all will know you are my disciples, If you have love for one another." Indeed, in love, all will be made right with God, so let us trust in God and in the Son and Spirit sent to us. Amen.