

THE VOCABULARY OF FAITH

9) Conversion / Being Born Again

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August 16, 2015

It must have been an awkward moment, one fraught with the potential for misunderstanding and confusion. For here was Nicodemus, a Pharisee and proud member of the religious establishment, revered for his learning, his wisdom and his leadership—meeting with Jesus, viewed by his colleagues and the establishment that they upheld with a strange combination of both fear and loathing.

Not surprisingly, the meeting was arranged at night—the original episode, one might say, of “Nick at Night.” No doubt this religious leader would not have been comfortable meeting with this revolutionary for the hill country of Galilee in broad daylight. No, meeting under the cover of darkness made this meeting much more feasible for Nicodemus.

There is, however, yet another dimension at work here—a literary dimension. Scholars believe that the choice to meet in the darkness has a not so subtle significance in the eyes of the author of John’s Gospel. The implied message here, they suggest, is that Nicodemus was living “in the dark,” blinded to the presence and power of God’s Spirit.

Based on the brief dialogue between Jesus and these religious leader, one would be inclined to agree. Not only was he blind, but he was, in many respects, clueless as to the significance of Jesus’ message. Even so, he begins with flattery: “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God—for no one could do what you are doing apart from the presence of God.

Jesus offers a somewhat mysterious reply in response. **“No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”**

At this point, the cluelessness of Nicodemus becomes painfully obvious as he chooses to interpret this teaching literally. **“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”**

Now, I don’t image that Jesus actually rolled his eyes at this point, but it wouldn’t surprise me if he actually thought about it. Nevertheless, Jesus patiently explained, **“No one can enter the kingdom of heaven 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 say to you that 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, however, still doesn’t get it. **“How can these things be?”** he wants to know. Jesus, in turn, is amazed. **“Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet do not understand these things?”**

A fascinating exchange, don't you think? Here is a revered religious leader of Israel, one who has the respect and admiration of many for his wisdom and leadership. The only problem is that he is “in the dark” when it comes to the way God’s Spirit is at work in human lives. He fails to understand his own need for a spiritual rebirth, a transformation of the heart and mind.

It is, of course, this story of Nicodemus and Jesus’ teaching that one must be born again that has become the focal point for a rather sizable movement within contemporary Christian circles over the past forty years. Often referred to simply as the “born again movement,” it has managed, in some cases, to be quite divisive and controversial. The term, “born again,” has become, of course, a loaded term with plenty of negative baggage to sort through.

The reason for this negativity, I suspect, has something to do with the fact that some who have proclaimed that they have been born again, have done so with a sense of self-righteousness and judgmentalism that has demeaned those who have not shared their experience as somehow less than spiritual. As the late Chronicle columnist, Herb Caen wryly observed, “The only trouble with some born again Christians is that they are even more obnoxious the second time around.”

To put it bluntly, they have given the concept of conversion a bad name. Indeed, we in the mainline church are not especially inclined to talk about conversion because of all the negative and coercive images that it raises. And yet, conversion is a word that is far too important to dismiss from our vocabulary simply because someone else has hijacked its meaning. This morning, in this installment of “The Vocabulary of Faith,” I would like to make the case for the importance of reclaiming the meaning and the use of the word, conversion. It is, I believe, an absolutely vital word that is absolutely essential for a vital faith.

The word itself has a Latin origin—a word meaning “to turn around.” To experience a conversion is to experience a turning around, a change of perspective, a transformation of heart and mind, of intention and purpose.

Early in my faith journey, I was inclined to think of conversion as a “one time only” experience which, in effect, guaranteed my place in heaven. Conversion, as I understood it at the time, was essentially about being saved and going to heaven. On July 12, 1963, at the age of twelve, I had a conversion experience, one in which I chose to “accept Jesus Christ as my Savior.” While this is a choice that I have never regretted, it is a choice that I now understand very differently. I no longer understand conversion as a “once in a lifetime” moment that is primarily about being “saved” and “going to heaven.” Actually, it is so much more than that.

Conversion, you see, involves more than just one moment of time. It involves a series of moments. It is a process that unfolds over a life time of traveling the road of faith. It is not a goal. It is not a product to be consumed. It is often a gradual process in which we find ourselves being changed—transformed over time. I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases our reading from **Romans 12: “Fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out.”**

With this understanding in mind, we can begin to understand that Jesus' invitation is not just to be "born again," but to be born again and again and again. Without this experience of renewal and rebirth, life can become stuffy and stagnant and we can become limited by the status quo. Ideally, we will always in the process of being born all over again as we follow the lead of God's Spirit.

Allow me to add a brief footnote that while conversion is indeed a process, it is one that is experienced by different people in different ways. As Sly and the Family Stone used to sing, there are "Different strokes for different folks."

For some, conversion may occur with more drama and emotion. For others, conversion happens more quietly, subtly—without a lot of fanfare. You see, it doesn't really matter how conversion happens. What matters is that it does happen and that we find ourselves in the process of being changed from the inside out.

I am wondering this morning, about your own experience of conversion. In what ways have you experienced the transforming power of God's Spirit at work within you? In what ways have you felt the nudge to grow, to become, by the grace of God, someone that you are not yet? As you think back across the span of your life, can you identify the points and the places in which you have tasted and touched the renewing and refreshing presence of God's Spirit? Can you think of the times in which you have experienced what it means to be born again?

I hope that you can because that suggests to me that your life is not static or stagnant, that your experience of faith is dynamic and alive and that God is at work within you—changing you from the inside out.

You know, I think that it is most interesting that the writer of John's Gospel concludes the story of Nicodemus' night time visit with Jesus the way he does.

There is no conclusive end to the story--something that might suggest that Nicodemus suddenly grasped the truth of what Jesus shared with him. Some of us might wish for a more inspirational—something that illustrates the light that penetrates the darkness.

That, of course, would satisfy our desire for a happy ending. But that's not what we get. Instead, Nicodemus simply fades from view as the writer proceeds with his narrative about Jesus and mission of bringing light to the darkness. Yet, this is not the last time that Nicodemus is mentioned in John's gospel. There are two other places.

On one occasion, his colleagues were plotting against Jesus and hoping to arrest him. In response, Nicodemus offers a mild rebuttal. He reminds them that their law did not judge people without first giving them a hearing. The other Pharisees are a bit taken back by the fact that Nicodemus would defend the rights of this Galilean. "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?" that want to know.

While this is not exactly a bold profession of faith on the part of Nicodemus, there is, in his protest, enough evidence to suggest that Nicodemus was still thinking about his conversation with Jesus and still exploring the meaning of his message.

The last mention of Nicodemus comes near the end of the gospel account, after the crucifixion of Jesus. In the 19th chapter of John, we learn that Nicodemus was one of those who came to anoint and take care of the body before placing it in the tomb.

This, once again, is but a very brief reference to Nicodemus and it is important not to try to read too much into it. But we can, at least, suggest that, by this stage of his journey, Nicodemus felt committed enough to Jesus to risk his reputation by offering this witness of compassion and love.

While we cannot, in these two very brief accounts, draw a definitive conclusion, we can see clear evidence that the Spirit of God was actively at work in the life of Nicodemus. Where once there had been only darkness, there was now a light burning brightly.

If I am not mistaken, what we are witnessing here is the process in which Nicodemus was being changed from the inside out. Amen.