

“Messy Business”
Based on John 3: 1-17
by Rev. Meghan Davis
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Anyone who has ever been present for a birth (other than their own) knows that, in addition to being extremely difficult, birth is messy. Even if you haven't been present at a birth or seen a graphic film of it in a health or biology class, you've probably seen a close enough imitation of it on TV. Recently, a woman on a reality show, who actually had her birth filmed and aired on the show, got panned across the internet for saying what we were all thinking when the baby came out: gross. Of course, I don't know from first hand experience but come on, just because you love your baby doesn't mean you can't be honest about it. A newborn, just out of the womb, not yet cleaned off is... kind of icky. (Not to mention, I don't think anyone who has just finished giving birth should be held accountable for anything she says. But anyway...) Just like birth, re-birth is a difficult, messy business.

As the passage begins, Nicodemus, a Pharisee and religious leader, comes to talk to Jesus in the night—that is—in secret. He is interested in what Jesus has to say but he doesn't necessarily want to be associated with Jesus. Nicodemus shows up two more times in John. Later on he will have an opportunity to defend Jesus and after Jesus' death, he will help Joseph of Aramathea, another secret disciple, bury Jesus. But in this first appearance, Nicodemus' motives are unclear. Is he really coming to Jesus to learn or is he perhaps acting as a spy, trying to find out just how much of a danger this Jesus of Nazareth is? We just don't know.

But we do know that Nicodemus says to Jesus, “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.” Nicodemus seems to recognize who Jesus is, as one who has come from God. He praises Jesus but Jesus reflects it out. He says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Jesus' signs and wonders are not about him, they are about God. And though the statement is a negative—No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above—in effect he is saying that the kingdom of God is to be seen not only by himself but by all who are born from above. It's Jesus, but not only Jesus.

What is translated “from above” here can also be translated “again” or “anew.” And of course, this is how Nicodemus interprets Jesus' saying. Thinking Jesus is saying that one must be born again he asks, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?” If you thought it was tough going *out* as a 6 or 7 pound baby, imagine the reverse as an adult. I would guess Nicodemus' mom would be just as glad not to be present for this conversation. It reminds me of Jesus' saying about the camel going through an eye of a needle. Surely, whatever Nicodemus thought, whether he was confused or being a smart-aleck (or perhaps a little of both) surely he didn't think that Jesus was suggesting climbing back into mom's womb and trying again. Perhaps this was his way of saying, “Jesus, say it clearly, in words I can understand.”

But rather than simplifying, Jesus replies, “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.” Do not be astonished? Jesus goes on to be even *less* clear about what he means. Maybe “confused” is the more accurate word for what Nicodemus is likely experiencing.

Part of what Jesus seems to be saying is that, though we cannot know where the Spirit goes or exactly what the Spirit is doing, if we are born of the Spirit we will sense her movement. But Nicodemus isn’t one for ambiguity. He asks, “How can these things be?” Nicodemus is all caught up on logistics: how does it work? He doesn’t have the most basic understanding: the understanding that it is impossible to truly understand. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus wants a black and white religion, a religion that makes sense, a religion with that can be summarized with a list of “do’s” and “don’ts” and consequences for right or wrong behavior. But Jesus uses this poetic, metaphorical language with vague meaning that he will not clearly explain to let Nicodemus know that it’s not about understanding, it’s about believing. As Karoline Lewis, a professor at Luther seminary notes, in John’s Gospel, “Believing...is a verb and is subject to all of the ambiguity, uncertainty, and indecisiveness of being human. Having an incarnate God necessitates an incarnational faith: believing is just as complicated as being human.”¹ I love that: believing is just as complicated as being human.

Jesus goes on to say, “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.” Jesus finds Nicodemus unable to comprehend even the simplest, most basic and most “earthly” aspects of his teaching. So how could he understand the truly remarkable aspects of what Jesus knows and could tell? Jesus says that the Son of Man will be lifted up. Lewis explains, “Because of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus—all of which are implied in ‘the Son of Man must be lifted up’—eternal life is possible, but the incarnation ensures that eternal life includes life now, abiding in Jesus.”² The good news is that Nicodemus will have more chances. He gets at least two more chances to believe and by his third recorded encounter with Jesus, when he helps to bury him, he seems to have come to believe. Even if Nicodemus does not believe by the time he helps to bury Jesus, he will have the opportunity to believe, as do we all, when earthly life and the kingdom of God come together into one earthly/heavenly reality.

And next we come to John 3:16. A citation well-known to most Americans, whether or not they can quote, “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.” “John 3:16” is plastered on

¹ Karoline M. Lewis, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 73.

² *Ibid.*

billboards, signs in football stadiums, even on some players themselves. In the US, John 3:16 has become a kind of secret code, or litmus test to tell the saved from the not saved. John 3:16 divides those “in the know” from those who don’t have a clue.

When it comes to John 3:16, it seems that people fixate on the “believe” and “not perish” aspects of the verse and gloss over what I consider the most important part: ***God so loved the world.*** It’s not “God so loved those who believe” or “God so loved those who God predestined to believe” but “God so love ***the world.***” No qualifiers. And verse 17 goes on to say, “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.” God did not send the Son to condemn the world. But, again, that part is often overlooked to skip to the part about being saved through him. And yet, how often do we find those “in the know” condemning others? How often do we find ourselves trying to determine if other people are “really” Christian? If Christ was not sent here to condemn, what place is it for any of us to condemn anyone else? Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ. But Christ loves us, Christ forgives us and Christ does not condemn.

Today’s lectionary selection ends at verse 17, actually stopping in the middle of Jesus’ speech. In the interest of full disclosure, I must note that Jesus does go on to say, “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” Jesus does say that condemnation is coming to the non-believers, but remember even Nicodemus eventually comes around and acts as a disciple. More important than the condemnation for those who love the darkness and whose deeds are evil, are the traits of those who believe: they love light and their deeds can be seen clearly to have been done in God. It’s about discipleship. Remember, this is how the passage begins, with Nicodemus professing that Jesus’ deeds are of God and Jesus saying that anyone who is born from above can also see the kingdom of God.

And that is rebirth of the Spirit. Our first re-birth is at baptism. We are reborn over and over, every time we take communion, and every day we re-commit ourselves to Christ and Christ’s way. As one commentator explains, “being born from above and believing in Jesus are clearly not so much about what one does with one’s mind as about what one does with one’s heart and one’s life.”³ The glorious paradox: being born of the Spirit—and reborn—is both as easy as choosing to commit and recommit ourselves to God and as difficult as climbing back into our mothers’ wombs. But believing in Christ, faith in Christ is more than something we do with our minds and our mouths. Ultimately, it’s not up to us to decide in our brains to be reborn in the Spirit. Rebirth, like the faith to which it is inextricably bound, is a gift from God. But it is not a gift to be taken lightly. It is both a precious gift and a weighty

³ George W. Stroup, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 72.

responsibility. But ultimately, it is God's gift, God's work, God's labor that brings our re-birth.

I invite you to take a few moments of silence now to consider how you might see the kingdom of God. I invite you to re-commit yourself to Christ and be born again from above.

Deborah Kapp, a professor at McCormick Seminary asks, "Who among us has room to grow in our faith?" I think a more appropriate question would be, and perhaps what she meant to say is: who among us does *not* have room to grow in our faith? Kapp continues, "The good news of this text is that God is prepared—even eager—to do the hard, messy, sweating labor that will bring us to maturity and new life."⁴ Yes, God is prepared—even eager—to do the hard, messy, sweating labor that will bring us to maturity and new life. Good News indeed! But anyone who's ever been present for a birth knows that it's quite an ordeal for the baby as well. The baby leaves the security and warmth of the only home the baby has ever known to be pushed and pulled into the bright light and cold air of a great big unknown world. It's messy, strenuous work for the baby, too. It's hard work. It's messy work but it is so worth it. So let's get messy! Let us be born of the Spirit every day. And if anyone asks you, "are you born again?" The answer is yes! If you have been baptized, the answer is yes! If you re-commit yourself to Christ today the answer is yes! Every time you re-commit yourself to Christ you are born again.

⁴ Deborah J. Kapp, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 72.