

“Come in, sit awhile, and have a cup of tea. . .”

John 3:1-12

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Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?"

Once upon a time, there was a woman named Sophie who set out to discover the meaning of life. She did what many of us would do. She read everything she could get her hands on---history, philosophy, psychology. Though she learned a lot, nothing she read satisfied her. She asked many others about the meaning of life. While their discussions were long and lively, they couldn't agree on anything.

Finally Sophie put all her belongings in storage. She set off in search of the meaning of life. She went to South America. Africa. She landed in India where, it was said, there was a man who knew the meaning of life. Finally, deep in the Himalayas, someone told her how to reach his house. It was a tiny hut perched on the side of a mountain.

Sophie climbed and climbed to reach his front door. When she finally got there, she knocked. “Yes?” said the wizened old man who opened it. “I have come halfway around the world to ask you one question.” Sophie gasped for breath. “What is the meaning of life?”

“Please come in and have some tea,” the old man said.

“No,” she said. “I mean, no thank you. I didn’t come all this way for tea. I came for an answer. Tell me, *please*, what is the meaning of life?”

“We shall have tea,” the man said, so she gave up and came inside. While he was brewing the tea Sophie caught her breath. She told him of the books she had read, the people she met, the places she’d been. The old man listened (which was just as well, since she spoke on the inhale and the exhale). He placed a tea cup in her hand. Then he began to pour the tea.

Sophie was so busy talking, she didn’t notice her cup was full. The old man just kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides and spilled to the floor, steaming.

“What are you doing?! It’s overflowing, can’t you see that? Stop! There’s no more room!”

“Just so,” the old man said to her. “You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do?” There is no more room in your cup. Come back when it is empty and then we’ll talk.”¹

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In another time and place there was a holy man named Nicodemus. His entire life had been set apart² to study the scriptures and traditions. Much of his life had been spent reading. Many thought of him as wise. Nicodemus was respected by his colleagues. After all, he had been elected to the ruling council, the seventy-one elders.³ He was the kind of guy you’d like to be friends with, just in case you got into some legal or ethical trouble.

¹ Folk tale quoted in Living by the Word, 2/21/96, Barbara Brown Taylor, adapted for this sermon.

² He was a Pharisee. The meaning of the Greek word for Pharisee is “separate ones” or “set apart ones”. It is interesting to note this is also the meaning of “Holy” (to be set apart).

³ Also known as the Sanhedrin.

Yet even though Nicodemus was wise and holy, he still had questions. Questions no one had been able to answer. You would think someone in his position would be done asking questions, having lived a good while and studied so long. But the questions nagged at Nicodemus. They were like an itch that wouldn't go away. We don't know what they were exactly, no one does. But we can imagine. Questions like, "Why do people hurt one another so? Why does a young man go on a shooting spree and kill college students? What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Nicodemus looked high and low for someone who might have some answers.

He had heard of a rabbi, a man named Jesus, who was teaching and healing. Not so long ago Jesus had created quite a stir. You may have heard about it. Changed water into wine at a big wedding party in Cana. There were other things, too. Things that hardly seemed possible. People began to flock around Jesus because of what he was doing.

Nicodemus wondered if Jesus might be the one who could finally answer his nagging questions, but he was a little unsure about approaching him. Kind of like the senior pastor of a big steeple church going to the street corner preacher for advice. Nicodemus didn't feel entirely comfortable going to meet Jesus out in the open⁴. So he visits Jesus under cover of darkness.

One night he slinks off to where Jesus is staying. He barely taps on the door. Shhh. Don't want to attract attention. The door creaks open. "Come in, refresh yourself, and have some tea."⁵

But Nicodemus the wise, he didn't come to sit and drink tea! He blurts out, "Rabbi, I've heard about what it is you've been doing. Where---or who--- do you come from? Is it God? How else could you do such miraculous signs?"

And Jesus turns to him, beginning to prepare the tea. You can just about imagine the look on his face, the posture of his body, the turn of his head. Jesus looks right *through* him. What Jesus says has *absolutely nothing* to do with Nicodemus' question! "You cannot see the kingdom unless you are born again." Is he crazy? What is he talking about? Nicodemus is thrown off by Jesus' comments about being "born again".

⁴ It might not have be the best thing for a leader of the Jews to be seen with this itinerant preacher.

⁵ Yes, this is some poetic license, as tea might not have been common in the Middle East during Jesus' time.

As he sits down, Nicodemus' head is spinning. He came for clarity; now he is more confused than ever! "How can anyone be born twice?"

It will be a while before Nicodemus realizes Jesus is not talking of physical birth. Jesus speaks of spiritual birth, a second awakening, a new kind of living that has completely different parameters.

Nicodemus came looking for answers. He thinks he wants knowledge, but Jesus knew, more knowledge is *not what he most needed*.⁶ He is full to the brim with knowledge, his cup overflows with it. Still his spirit is empty and restless, because it does not yet rest in the Lord⁷. The Lord's answer turns to Nicodemus' need for new life. His need to be open to the Spirit, to empty himself to receive a second birth.

We all know being born the first time is not something we choose. It just happens, in God's good time. Being *born again* is also not something **we** decide, not something **we** make happen. God chooses us and claims us first, then we respond. It is not something we control. Not something we can conquer. And yet, there has to be room for Christ. Room to allow the Spirit in. Room to grow.

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Preacher Fred Craddock tells the story of visiting the Widow Washburn. The woman was very poor, ninety-one years old. It was a tiny ramshackle house, dirt floor. The pastor had come to call on her, and he was rather uncomfortable doing it. He gingerly settled into a chair, trying not to touch anything. "Would you like some tea?" "No thank you, ma'am."

He began to talk of religion. But Widow Washburn, she cut him short.

"I was born again---saved--- when I was 14 years old, but Preacher, I think that's done gone by now. I'll tell you something. I'm tired out. People don't backslide; they just get worn down. Preacher, you wanna talk about faith? Talk to my son George. He's got a head full of notions, but his soul is as empty as that chair."

⁶ In an interesting footnote to last week's sermon, one commentator said Nicodemus was seeking fruit from the tree of knowledge but what he really needed was fruit from the tree of life.

⁷ A reference to the famous statement by St. Augustine, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, Lord."

The preacher went to visit George. George was very well read. He didn't work. He *read* all the time. A whole shelf full of the Great Books. All the classics. Plato. Aristotle. Dante. You name it, he could talk about it. He could plumb wear you out talking philosophy and ethics and history. The preacher and George had many interesting conversations over the years, and then George moved away.

One day, years later, a postcard came in the mail. Addressed to the preacher. Just a plain white card, no return address. "I was baptized Sunday. Born again. George"⁸

You see, George, he had a head full of notions. Lofty notions. Great knowledge. But until he was born again, until he emptied himself, until he made room in his life for God, that head full of notions didn't amount to a hill of beans.

And oh, Nicodemus, well the next time we hear him he is arguing with prison guards and Pharisees. His cronies are out to nail Jesus. Nicodemus asks a question: "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" (John 7:51)

Nicodemus is last seen in the darkness of early evening. He bears a heavy burden, on his back a mixture of embalming oils and spices, myrrh and aloe, questions still burning in his heart, but his cup having been emptied some time ago. (John 19: 38-39).

⁸ "As I Remember It" Stories told by Dr. Fred B. Craddock. Audio CD. Adapted slightly to fit with this sermon.