

Born of the Spirit

Sermon 102 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 30, 2021

John 3:1-21

Some of you may know that I was able to get away to spend a few days with my sister, at the beach a couple of weeks ago. We were there to celebrate her completion of Army Bootcamp, something she had been thinking about doing for almost twenty years, something her 38 year old body was challenged to complete. This was something worth celebrating, and I felt honored to be a part of that celebration.

As awesome as it was to be away for this specific reason, I honestly cannot remember the last time I was away from home with just my sister (or sisters, for that matter), away from all of the responsibilities of everyday life. There were no emails to check. No phone calls to answer. No dogs to take out or feed. No child needing my attention. No dinner to prepare. No clutter to clean up. No yard work to be done. No meetings to attend.

Nowhere I had to be, except exactly where I was.
It was amazing.

The strangest thing happened though. As I was spending time with my sister, I began to notice that as different as we are, we seem to be aging in many of the same ways. Now, I have three sisters and we are all very different. But Melanie and I spent most of our lives together. We are only 18 months apart in age, and since she is older (don't tell her I told y'all that), I have never known life without her.

Our childhood stories are wrought with conflict and argument as she and I sorted out our relationship with very, very, different personalities and ways of seeing the world. Over the years we have learned how to get along and even appreciate, respect, and love one another despite our many, many differences. But we have remained, as different as they come.

So, you might imagine my surprise last week when I started to notice we were walking the same way, holding our purses the same way, making similar expressions, and using similar mannerisms. Our voices are even starting to sound the same. It's weird; but there is no denying it now, the two of us are

indeed daughters of the same parents, we come from the same gene pool. Different as we think we are, we are both children of Dawn and Bill Tatum.

As I listened to her tell me her stories from boot camp, of how she's reading the New Testament straight through – something she started while she was away, I couldn't help but remember that as different as we might believe we are, in addition to being born of the same biological parents and raised in the same household, we are first and foremost children of God... born of the Spirit.

In today's reading from the Gospel of John, a man named Nicodemus approaches Jesus in the night, wanting to know how one can be born of the Spirit. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one [really] enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" he asks.

Jesus' response is characteristically open-ended, reinforcing the necessity of being "born from above" while also reminding Nicodemus that "The wind [same word for Spirit, in the Greek] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes."

"How can these things be?" Nicodemus wants to know.

This is the last we will hear from him until chapter 7 when he shows up again, hanging out with his fellow Pharisees as the heat rises around Jesus and his unprecedented ministry. In this second appearance, the authorities – meaning police in collaboration with religious institutional leadership – are wanting to arrest Jesus, to put an end to his controversial claims, miracles, and Sabbath healings.

The first interaction with Nicodemus leaves us wondering where he really stands with Jesus.

Why did he come in the night? Was he afraid he might be seen by one of his friends if he went to Jesus in the daylight?

There was a lot of tension between the Temple and the Jesus movement. Nicodemus, being a Pharisee and a leader would have had a lot to lose should he become associated with it. In the Johannine era, disciples and the

early Christians were being excommunicated from Temple Judaism for shifting their allegiance and embracing the way of Jesus. *Was Nicodemus sympathetic to their cause and trying to cover his tracks while he went to find out more?*

He leaves the first interaction with Jesus, the one in chapter 3, without any sense of resolution. In fact, he just vanishes from the scene altogether while Jesus turns the conversation into a monologue.

The second time Nicodemus shows up in John's Gospel he raises yet another question, this time revealing his sympathy to Jesus' unfair treatment under the law of the land. "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?"

We won't see or hear from Nicodemus again until the story of John's Gospel nears its end. It is Nicodemus who shows up with Joseph of Arimathea, bringing oils to anoint and prepare Jesus' body for burial. John tells us that Joseph of Arimathea was a *secret* disciple, because he was afraid of the religious establishment and the consequences of being a public disciple. Makes us wonder if somewhere, in the background between these three appearances Nicodemus had also become a secret disciple?

But thinking back on that first encounter, the verses in focus today, when Nicodemus first shows up in the darkness and wants to know, "How can all this be?... How is it that one can be born of the Spirit, how can one be a child of God? How can one live in the Kingdom, the dwelling place of God after being born of the flesh?"

I see a lot of myself in Nicodemus.

His questions make so much logical sense, do they not? But I also find it easy to understand why someone in his position, someone with social, financial, and political stability might travel to Jesus in the darkness of night. I can easily understand why he might not have wanted to be seen. After all, he was just starting to investigate, he wasn't committing yet to anything outside of the institutions that had built him up and supported him up to this point. He knew that stepping out and seeking after Jesus in the daylight would lead to him being cut off from his family of origin, so to speak. For Nicodemus, and

others like him, this was an either/or situation, not a both/and. He had to choose whether he would keep the life he had always known or whether he would allow himself to be born into a new family altogether.

The consequences were as real as the choice that was before him. And so he wanted to know *how* it would all work... *How can it be that I could be born of the Spirit?*

Maybe it wasn't fear at all that led Nicodemus to seek Jesus in the night. Maybe it was guilt or shame. We don't know a lot about his past, but we might assume the legalism of his current environment left little room for mistakes or grace. Maybe Nicodemus wasn't afraid of being seen by others, maybe Nicodemus was afraid of being seen for who he truly was. A sinner, a human being, someone with a past full of brokenness and poor choices. *How could someone like that be Spirit-born? How could God allow him a place at the table, entrance into the family?*

Whatever the reason for Nicodemus' approach, Jesus doesn't explain with intellectual certainty how all of the mysteries of divine re-birth take place, he simply affirms *that* they do.

We may not know *how* Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, we just know *that* he did.

We do not know *how* God's kingdom is taking shape in this world, we just know *that* it is.

We may not be able to rationally understand the invitation to join this new family, we just know *that* we are invited. And in that invitation we experience a love unlike anything we could ever know elsewhere.

How is one born of the Spirit?

Love.

For God so loved the world... Jesus tells Nicodemus. God did not send me into the world to condemn it, but to save it.

In this first encounter, Jesus offers Nicodemus a new family, a new life, and a new identity as a child of God. With it comes an experience of God's love that is unconditional and unparalleled. But it does not come without cost. What this first encounter in chapter three reminds us is that a disciple of Jesus is not born in secret. One cannot be Spirit-born and then return to business as usual when the dawn breaks with its piercing light. No, being Spirit-born changes our whole identity and demands our fullest commitment.

Nicodemus cannot be Spirit-born until he is ready to be a disciple of Jesus in broad daylight, in front of his friends, at the Temple, and when everyone is looking.

Nicodemus cannot be Spirit-born until he is willing to give up the privileges of his position.

Nicodemus cannot be Spirit-born with one foot in and one foot out.

And perhaps the lesson for us today is that neither can we.

Maybe we are afraid of being exposed for what we are and for the truth that we proclaim. Maybe we are afraid that if we live our faith too publicly, our friends will think we're too radical or worse, too simple minded. What would people think if they see us spending too much time with those whom Jesus would prefer to spend time with: the sick, the poor, the unworthy and unclean? How would our colleagues see us if we started thinking in terms of love before everything else?

Or maybe that's not it at all. Maybe we are ashamed that if we allowed ourselves to be fully seen, fully exposed, all out in broad daylight, God would not even want us at all. Would we be welcomed at the table in God's Kingdom given all that we like to keep hidden?

According to Jesus, the answer is a resounding and unconditional yes. Because God is full of nothing but love. For God so *loved* the world. God came into the world through the person of Jesus to save the world, not to condemn it. But in the experience of this salvation, in the experience of being born from above, we are changed into children of God which is a transformation that cannot be partially done.

We cannot claim Christ in the darkness and Caesar in the daylight.
We cannot be one foot in and one foot out.

If we are to be born of the Spirit, we have got to be all in.

I hope, like Nicodemus, we will continue to return to Jesus as we work it all out for ourselves. Maybe at first it's too much to take on. Maybe the stakes are too high and the risk, too great. But even still, I hope that we will keep showing up in the night, in the morning, and in the blazing rays of the noonday sun, bringing all of our fears, our guilt, our shame, and our honest questions to the one who will always respond with love for us, and a love that compels us forward.

I hope that at the end of our stories, we, like Nicodemus, will show up when it counts and prove ourselves to be true disciples – not secret ones.

And if by luck, we have the opportunity to step away for a moment and take stock of our lives, I wonder what kind of family resemblance we'd notice?

Would we see the genetic makeup of power and privilege revealing us as children of the flesh?

Or would the greater trait of love overshadow it all, proving that in the end, we really were born of the Spirit?