

John 3:1-11

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, '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.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, '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.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

'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.

John 19:38-42

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

“What Did Jesus Say to Nicodemus?” (“What Do You Say to a Fundamentalist?”)

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Have you seen any of these 3_D movies? They're incredible. You sit there in your seat with these special glasses, and things jump out at you. I saw the movie *Avatar*. I think there were three of us in the theater. I'm in a spaceship, and we're going to land, and I have to tell you, I'm looking to tighten my seat belt. Things are flying off the screen that have fire in them and I can feel the heat. There are little insects and bugs that are running around, and I want to reach up and grab one. And then somebody throws a ball or an object that I duck. Here you are, in the movie *Avatar*, you're right there on the planet Pandora. And I'm thinking to myself, "Do I have a clone somewhere?" And then in the middle of this fantasy, words that begin to bring wisdom to reality. The natives of Pandora, and I know you don't understand this, they're asking the question, "Can you train an avatar," and the these words - "You cannot add to a vessel that is already full, you cannot add to a vessel that is already full." You know, part of our problem with the Bible is our knowledge of it. Some of what we miss is due to the fact that we think we

know it, and we do, but we don't know all of it. You cannot add to a vessel that is already full. If you think you know it, there's nothing else to learn.

The story of Jesus and Nicodemus, for example. I thought I knew what it said. I would have told you what I thought it said, but I have had two weeks to study it, and I started by reading it as if for the first time, and I saw something. It's like the movie *Avatar*, it jumped out at me. Did you realize that Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark? Eugene Lowry points out that's the important thing in that story, in fact he refers to Nicodemus as "Nick at night." It's important. This story is about the evolving of character. A Pharisee, a very wise man, very powerful. Jesus loved the Pharisees. His problem with them was a lovers' quarrel, you know? Rich, powerful, he had it all, he knows it all, he's wise but he lacks wisdom, you know? He has a sense of himself, but probably a lack of common sense, you could say. He was a vessel that was full, but he knew he was empty, thought he thought that people needed to see him as full, but he knew he was empty. He had stature but he didn't have purpose, he was short on character, and you can't have character if you think you've arrived and know it all, because character evolves.

So he came to Jesus looking for the Kingdom of God. He who is in the dark and knows it, walks toward the light, and Jesus said to him - these are my words - probably Jesus said it better, but John didn't get it all, so - "You want what you do not have, but you have come to the light. There is nothing you need to do, but there is something you need to be. You need to be born again. Or born from above. "Gennatha anothen" is the Greek, has multiple meanings. How do you be born again? Dumb old Nicodemus is looking at obstetrics. Let's look at what's truly being said, for there is more to this text. "Born again," what does it mean? What does it mean to us?

We know we don't know it all. We're vessels that are not full. We can learn, we can be filled. If we walk in the dark toward the light, and who doesn't now the dark? There is in everyone something that is yet to be discovered, and it's true if we're young or old, male, female, criminals, cops, wise, fools, you, me, any of us. There is more to us than we know. Phillips Brooks knew it, he said, "We do not pray for easy lives, we pray to be a stronger person. We do not pray for tasks equal to our powers, but we pray for the power to be equal to our task. And the day of our work shall be no miracle, but we shall be a miracle, and every day we shall wonder at ourselves, at the richness of life, which has come to us by the grace of God, born again, awakened anew, something in us is evolving - what is it? What is it?"

I got a letter this week. What an honor to receive it. It said, "It is our pleasure to inform you that on January 5, 2010, your information was received and accepted in inclusion in the *2010 Edition Presidential Who's Who*. Each year, recognizes and selects key executives, professional and organizations of all disciplines and industries for outstanding - get this - outstanding business and professional achievement. This recognition is shared by those who have reached a distinguished level of success."

I felt born again. I mean, I got good competence. I do a good job, I know that. But to be elevated into *Who's Who Presidential*, into a group that had reached a distinguished level

of success. I did ponder for a moment - I wonder why? Could be the sermons? Could be the classes? Maybe it's the publications, the things I've written in the *Carillon*. Maybe somebody actually reads that thing. Maybe it's the way I represented the United Methodist Church in General Conference. Sat there for two weeks, six times. Maybe it's the work with you. In the midst of these moments of exaltation, I noticed something about the letter I hadn't seen. It was addressed, "Dear Carl." "Dear Carl." My God. Oh, well.

It reminds me of a friend. The phone rang, he picked it up. The voice on the other end, the sweet voice of an older woman said, "Is Martha there?" "There is no Martha here." Not long after, the phone rings. Same voice - "Is Martha there?" "There's no Martha here, I'm sorry." Third time, the phone rings. "Is Martha there?" Jim, my friend, said as kindly as he could, "There is, really, no Martha here. It is possible that you have the wrong number." Whereupon she replied, "Young man, I have the right number. You're answering the wrong phone."

Born again means we take a look at our lives and we think about how we are evolving. Are we answering the right phone? Are we dialing in the right number? And if we're not, whose? And who are we? Who are we? Furthermore, who are we becoming?

Speed skater Apolo Ohno has been interesting to watch, the story is fascinating. Most of you probably know it. His mother left them, his father raised him, the relationship between the two was stormy. At one point Dad took Apolo out into the woods, put him in a cabin and said, "You don't leave that place until you figure out what you want to be." He came out and said, "Okay, I'll be a skater." Won in the Olympics, four years ago, won big. Fame, fortune, he got everything he wanted, thought he would retire, but then it was in Seattle, you know, where he lived, it's south of Vancouver so he decided, one more time, and so he did, and he skated again. Ice skater, speed skater, end of the story, he won. You saw it, seven medals, most decorated of all winter sports Olympians. End of the story. Un-unh. After the Olympics four years ago, they asked him to be on "Dancing with the Stars" and he and Julianna danced and they won. They scored a perfect score, and now people recognize him. "I know you, you're the dancer." End of the story. No. He is involved in a fight to do something about the world AIDS epidemic. He is involved in programs where he goes into schools and tells young people "Stay in school," drawing from his own adolescence which was troubled, and he built a Ronald McDonald house for children who have cancer and other debilitating diseases. He walks toward the light, and when someone walks toward the light, their character evolves. For us, for any of us.

Maybe it's something we never got over, and we've got to get back to where we walk toward the light. Maybe it's a talent that we didn't quite know we had. Maybe we go back to that, and see if we can pick it up again. We walk toward the light. Maybe it's an interest in something. Maybe we delve into that. We walk toward the light. Born again, walking toward the light. Nicodemus came at night, he walked toward the light, and his character evolved. I think that's what it means.

I thought that was all there was. I could subdivide what I just said into three points. But there's more. Nicodemus, born again. There's more. It popped out at me, never saw it. It's at the end of the Gospel, John, It's important. It's about emerging compassion for people. Emerging compassion. You don't usually read this text, because it's due to the fact that we really don't think much about Jesus' last day, his death. We think about Palm Sunday in church, we think about the Last Supper, we think about getting together, you know, the requiem music on Good Friday, and then we jump over to Easter. But if we stopped and looked back, we would have seen it. I never saw it. After Jesus' death on the cross, who took the body? Who put the body into the tomb? It was Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who had the spices, put the body of Jesus in the tomb. It's amazing, here, when you think about it. This Pharisee, a person of stature and position, people respected him, risking all of that to do what he did for this revolutionary. Putting his body to rest. In the dark, Nicodemus, born again, became the light. Emerging compassion. Rebirth is only the beginning. It leads to being the light. It leads to a new way. It leads to compassion.

I don't often quote George Carlin in sermons, but I have, in every church I've ever been in, including this one. Every time I do, there is a sort of unison congregational gasp - "What is he going to say?" George Carlin was vulgar, interesting, smart. Most of what he said, you probably shouldn't repeat. You might be amused by it. Even less amount there would be to take from what he said and put it into a sermon that would be preached on a Sunday morning, but he points out some important truth when he's talking about opinion polls on television, and where the question is posed, people invited to phone in their vote, their thought, what they think about the question, and he said, "Did you ever notice when these polls come out and the questions are posted, there's always like 18% of people who vote 'I don't know.' It costs a dollar to vote. People are voting 'I don't know.'" He said, "I'm picturing two people, man and woman, sitting on a couch. The question of the day comes up on the TV set and he says to her, 'Honey, go get the phone.' She gets the phone, brings it to him, he dials in the number and he shouts into the phone, 'I don't know!' and it cost him a dollar. And then he sits down, proud of himself." And Carlin concludes this observation by saying, "Sometime, you know, you gotta stand up for what you believe, even if you're not sure about it, even if you don't know."

Nicodemus became the light. He moved from lull to light, he moved from being an expert to being a compassionate care-giver, he moved from being an example of success to the image of Christ, and he became the light on that very dark night, and most of us miss it. Compassion means putting the dead savior's body to rest. Compassion means forgiveness for what is unforgivable. It means reaching out when you'd rather be hitting hard.

Martin Niemoller, it's a name many of us know, stood up to Adolf Hitler, said he would not worship the Nazi flag. They put him in prison, Dachau, solitary confinement. Pastor Niemoller found compassion, the image of Christ. He preached this sermon at the Duke chapel in 1963, and he said this. "Through my window bars I see the gallows, and when I look at those gallows, I think of the times I have prayed for my friends who have been put up on the gallows. And sometime I have to fight, I have to resist the urge that when I think about them coming to take me from this place and putting me on the gallows,

because when they do that I think I have to fight the urge, because what I will say to them, I will say to them, 'You are criminals, you are murderers, you wait and see, there is a God in Heaven, and he will show you.' And then, the torturing question. 'What would have happened if Jesus, when they nailed him to his gallows, to his cross, had spoken like this, had cursed his enemies?' Nothing would have happened. Only, there would be no Gospel. And there would be no Christian church, and there would be no message of great joy. For he would have prayed against his enemies, not for them. He would have died against them, not for them."

Compassion. We evolve from character to compassion. Dacher Keltner, professor of psychology, Southern California University, he has an observation. He says, "You know, recent scientific findings are taking a look at what is the basic sort of motivation of the human spirit, and the view that we have had, the conventional view that has said we are basically selfish and we are full of greed and competitiveness, that that lies at the core of human behavior, we are beginning to see that compassion is deeply rooted in our brains, in our bodies, and in our most basic ways in which we communicate." Compassion. It's being a light in the darkness. Compassion was Masahiro, that demonstrated in the, you know, surviving the atomic bomb at Hiroshima, and he said that - it's in your bulletin, it's a great quote, it's from the book *The Last Train from Hiroshima*, great book, he says, "It does not matter who dropped the bomb. That is not an issue. It should never be an issue for any country. It should be an issue for all humanity. You must overcome sadness. You must come out of sadness." And then he said, "Teach your children." And then he said, "Children, teach your parents compassion." They can. Jesus said, if you want to be part of the kingdom of God, you be like a child. You know compassion and you live it. You're a light, and you show it. You don't put it under a basket, but you put it up so others can see it, so the light can shine. Compassion emerged Nicodemus, he came at night twice. He came in the dark, and he moved toward the light, and he helped put Jesus' body to rest in the dark. He was the light.

I'm going to end this sermon with a story that probably doesn't fit, and if my wife were here, probably wouldn't let me tell it. But I will. A man moved to Texas. Any Texans here? Went into a bar, ordered three glasses of beer, drank a little bit from each until he had finished off them all. One, two, three. A little bit from this one, a little bit from this one. The bartender was interested in that. He said, "The thing about draft beer is, it gets stale kind of quickly, so why don't you let me pour you one, pour you another three, I see that's what you do - by the way, why do you do that?" He said, "Well, I just moved here, and I have a brother in Colorado, and another brother in Wyoming, and on the first day of the month, we have this ritual. We all do this, we go to a bar and we order three glasses of beer and we drink our beer in honor of each other." The bartender was touched. What a great thing to do. Next time he came in, he ordered two glasses of beer. The bartender noticed. Walked over to him and said, "I share your grief. It's obvious that one of your brothers has died." He put his arm around him. The man looked up and said, "That's not it. My wife and I have just joined the Baptist church, and I gave up drinking. But that doesn't have any effect on my brothers."

The question for us, the next six weeks, the evolving of character, the emerging of compassion, what effect will faith have on us?