

John 3: 1-15

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. 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.

Take Your Mind and Use It

Rev. Charles Schuster

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Two thoughts provide the foundation for this sermon. The first one is from William Sloane Coffin, for years pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, who said, "Jesus died to take away our sins, not our minds." And then the words of Thomas Long, professor of homiletics, preaching, Candler school of Theology, Emory University. Thomas Long talked about when he was a young pastor in a church and how he was working so hard. Every week he'd work really hard on his sermons and put the services together, and it was burning him out, because he wanted to hit a home run every Sunday. You've heard me say the worst thing you can do is preach a good sermon, because then you've got next week. And it was getting to him. An old preacher pulled him aside and said, "Thomas, look. The primary thing about worship that's going to make a difference is God, not you. Secondly, long after the people in your congregation will forget what you've said in the sermons, they're going to remember, did you have a good time when you were preaching them?"

This morning I want to speak with you and have us think together of the importance of reason, as we take our minds and use them, and I intend to have a good time as I preach it. Miss Byrd died this week, Elizabeth Byrd. She'd been my Latin teacher in high school. She was not my favorite teacher, I was not her favorite student. She had this annoying thing that she did about placing students in the classroom, after there was an exam, according to how we did on the exam. Students with the worst grades were put in the front of the class so she could watch us. Students with the best grades were in the back of

the class. After each test, we received new seat assignments. I spent most of three years on the front row. Miss Byrd was a Methodist. In fact, she was a member of the United Methodist Church that I attended. And when I'd go to church there and she'd see me, she would greet me with the conjugation of some verb – *amo, amas, amat, amatis, amamus, amant*, - and she'd say that she expected me to be on the front row in church just like I had been in her Latin class. The day I was ordained Elder in the church, and all the members of my family traveled to Annual Conference at Buckhannon in West Virginia, at West Virginia Wesleyan College, that wonderful chapel there, I was surprised to see Miss Byrd in the congregation. I was never sure why she was in the chapel in Buckhannon, West Virginia, on that hot night in June in 1969, but I suspected that her motives were close to the motives of that large crowd that gathered in Lewiston, Maine, that turned up at the airport to see Vice President Walter Mondale off. This huge crowd came to see him. As the Vice President was about to board the plane he said, "I'm very flattered. Look out there, there are almost two thousand people here to see me." One of the citizens of Lewiston, Maine, standing next to Mondale said to him, "To be perfectly truthful, Mr. Vice President, we've never seen a 747 land at this airport, and I expect that many of the people are here to see if it will take off safely or crash." It may have been that kind of curiosity that drew Elizabeth Byrd to the site of my ordination 38 years ago. Miss Byrd died last week. She was ninety-four years old. I really never appreciated what she tried to do, to cover that yawning gap between ignorance and intelligence with regard to Latin, in my case. I never thanked her for the Latin class. I never told her I appreciated that she came to the ordination service. I think she thought she played an important role in my education. It turns out she did.

Jesus was a teacher. He was a rabbi. The word rabbi means teacher, a very special teacher. He had this idea about religion. He thought that we ought to be able to use our minds. He believed in reason in religion. He thought religion ought to make sense, and he was loved and respected as a teacher. Sure, he was a great preacher, of course. Certainly he was a great healer. Obviously he was the savior. No question about it, he was a prophet. But he was a great teacher, he taught the logic of love. He spoke of being born from above. The Greek words *gennethe anothen* translated as, Reverend Kershaw translated those Greek words, "born from above." He said, you've got to be born from above. You've got to look beyond the creation to the Creator. You've got to see the bigger picture. You've got to have the wider view – "born from above", *gennethe anothen*. Nicodemus came to Jesus. Nicodemus himself was a teacher. Nicodemus knew the logic of the law, but Jesus knew the higher logic of love. Nicodemus was a rabbi who came to Jesus in the night to learn the logic of love. Jesus' logic of love was basic, foundational. It began with God, his understanding of God. He believed that God was *abba*, God was a loving parent. What kind of God do we worship? He was always asking, "What kind of God do you worship?" For him, it was a loving parent. What kind of God do you worship?

A mother of a four-year-old, Emily, mother at the end of her rope, trying to get Emily to go to sleep. "Emily, it's time for you to go to bed and go to sleep, I don't want to hear any more out of you. I must insist. I'm not trying to be mean, but don't you see, God has given me a job, to be your mother." Emily looked at her mother and said without

hesitation, “Then you’re fired.” Is God a God we can fire? Is God a God who will go away from us? Is God like the father who established the tradition in the family that whenever one of the children did something wrong, they had to go out into the back yard and get their own switch for their own corporal punishment? And Bradley had misbehaved, and so Bradley was sent out into the back yard to get a switch, and he came back in with a handful of rocks and a lower lip quivering, and he said, “Daddy, I couldn’t find a switch, how about you just stone me?” Is that the kind of God we worship, one who will punish us, one who will inflict pain, one who will bring justice for a transgression? Some people believe God is like that, but not Jesus. He was born from above. He believed in the logic of love that began with his understanding of God. Jesus didn’t speak of a God who punishes us, but of a God who forgives us. Jesus didn’t give us the wrath of an angry God, he gave us the parable of the prodigal son, which is really the parable of the prodigal father, of the loving father. The loving father who rushes to greet the son who has left and has come back. You want to know what God is? It’s that image of the father rushing to greet the lost child. That’s the logic of love.

John Dunne wrote a book entitled *The Reasons of the Heart*, in which he speaks of the kindling of the heart, which goes hand in hand with the illumining of the mind. The kindling of the heart, the illumining of the mind, the two things are together, he said. The journey always includes the adventure of the heart that leads to the adventure of the mind, that’s the logic of love. I’m thinking about the racial strife in Louisiana, it brings back all those days of protest and riots, and the logic of love, we have yet to learn it, it seems. The logic of love that forgets how the color of skin does not give permission to discriminate. A family member sent us something that reveals, I think, the logic of love. It was written by an African American who said, “When I was born I was black. When I grew up I was black. When I went into the sun, I stayed black. When I got cold I was black. When I got sick I was black. When I die, I’ll still be black. Now, you white folks, when you were born you were pink. When you grew up you got white. You got into the sun, you got red. You get cold and you turn blue. You get sick and you turn green. You bruise and you turn purple. You die and you look gray. My question is this: Why do you call us colored?” That’s the logic of love, it looks at the heart, beyond the color of the skin. The logic of love says the treasures of the earth, they’re the treasures that will go away, the moth will chew them up, a thief will steal them, and in time they become irrelevant. But the true treasures, the important treasures are the treasures of heaven, and they will not go away. Not even death can take them.

Maya Angelou learned the logic of love from her teacher Frederick Wilkerson. “He asked me to read to him. I was twenty-four,” she said. “I was erudite and worldly. He asked me read from *The Lessons of Truth* in a section that ended with the words ‘God loves me.’ I read the words and I closed the book. My teacher said, ‘Read it again.’ I pointedly opened the book, sarcastically read, ‘God loves me.’ He said, ‘Again.’ After the seventh repetition, I began to sense that there was a possibility that God really did love me. Me, Maya Angelou. I suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all. Because I knew that if God love me, if God loved me, then I could do wonderful things. I could do great things. I could learn anything. I could achieve anything. What would stand against me with God. Since one person, any person, with God constitutes a majority.” The logic of love.

Wherein some will say, “Whatever,” the logic of love says, “Whatever it takes.” Whereas some will say, “Count your assets,” the logic of love says, “Count your blessings.” It’s a higher math, it’s born from above. It’s the reason of the heart. And the thing is, in the mind, even, it all adds up when we are born from above and we know the logic of love.

Now it is true that the traditional translation of those words that Jesus said to Nicodemus, the traditional translation is, “You must be born again.” You must be born again.

Gennethe anothan, born again, every day, in every way. Look around, be born again, the revelation of reason. *Gennethe anothan*, born again, a different sense of looking, bringing God down to earth. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, best known for her courage in helping people face grief and death and the stages of death and dying, but there was another side to her that came as a consequence. Because she faced death without fear, that enabled her to live her life as if each day were a gift. She offered this advice. She said, “Learn to get in touch with the silence within yourself and know that everything has a purpose.” Every day, a rebirth. Every event, a new life. God is in everything we see. God is a part of everything that happens. The reason of revelation, bringing God down to earth.

Mary McClintock Fulkerson is a seminary professor at Duke Divinity School. She tries to teach what Jesus taught. She says, “The more you can humanize authoritative text, the better. It is easier to imagine God acting in the world today.” And she wrote a book entitled *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*. God’s wisdom in the world. Take your mind and use it. The glory of God in the given, the revelation of God in the common things, the revelation of reason. Jesus never had the visions that Moses had. He never saw a stick that he picked up turn into a snake. He never saw a burning bush like Moses did. He didn’t have those kinds of visions like Jacob who saw a ladder, and on the ladder angels descending and ascending. He never spoke to the angel Gabriel like his mama did, Mary, you know. He had a different way of seeing. His revelation from God was worldly wisdom and God brought down to earth. The revelation of reason, every day you’re born to it.

Bass Mitchell is a Methodist minister in North Carolina. He wrote a book on the meditations of looking and listening for God. The title of his book is, *In Every Blade of the Rustling Grass*, based on one story, that whole book, on the story of a preacher who in a sermon told the congregation, “There’s a sermon in every blade of grass.” Be careful what you say, as preachers, because the next day that preacher was out in front of his house mowing his grass when a church member drove past, stopped his car, rolled down the window, yelled at the preacher, “That’s right, Preacher, cut those sermons short.” In every blade of grass, in everything we see and hear, in all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, for Jesus didn’t need to look beyond the natural world to see the supernatural. He didn’t need to look for the divine intervention to find God in life. You don’t need to check your mind at the door to be told that God is in the world, but you have to be able to look to see it. You have to be able to listen to hear it. God is in the world. Empirical observation caused Jesus to see some things. A farmer going out to plant seed, that’s all. A family at a table, and there are crumbs that fall under the table where the dogs get the crumbs. A treasure that’s found in the ground that’s been buried. A house that’s built on sand, another house that’s built on rock.

Harvey Cox in his book *Jesus Comes to Harvard* says, "Jesus dealt with issues on a case-by-case basis, and he used stories to help people grapple with moral issues." In other words, Jesus didn't give people answers to their questions once and for all, Jesus taught people a process of thinking so that when questions and issues and moral dilemmas would come up they could face them. It was worldly wisdom. It was God brought down to earth, a revelation of reason. Makes me think of Norris Burkes. Norris Burkes, a chaplain in the area, a military chaplain writes a column in the local newspaper, wrote one this past week that I thought was really good about a cruise he took to Alaska. He said, "Like any package tour, the itinerary took us where the company brought us and sold us what the company dictated, and from the ship we saw the wind-swept glaciers at the appointed hour, and on the land portion of the tour we stayed in company-owned hotels and panned for gold on the grounds of company-owned dredges. But the best came when we disembarked from the mother ship to explore sights impossible to program or prompt. We saw whales leap from the sea. We collected 200-year-old ice chunks from a glacier-fed lake. On a school bus we tracked down a bear. In a rental car we found the edge of the tundra and walked upon the spongy surface where we were permitted to walk." And he goes on to say, "The whole thing reminded me of the way we do church. In our search for faith, we book passage aboard large groups or denominations or churches. They take us to amazing places. They teach guiding principles. They train us in the ways of holy books and inspire us with music and sermons. But there comes a time in our own faith journey when we forge out on our own. We have to momentarily leave the mother ship because faith works best when we go on our own shore excursions." That's the wisdom of the world, the glory of God in the given, the revelation in reason Jesus taught. You can know the law, but you'd better know the spirit of the law, because some day you'll come up to a situation that'll have an exception to every rule. And you can hold onto affirmations of faith, and you can quote from verses of scripture, but you'd better be able to apply it to the circumstances that will come, that will alter all cases.

Oprah Winfrey said, "Real integrity is doing the right thing and knowing that nobody's going to know that you did it." And Frieda Stark said, "There can be no happiness if the things we believe are different from the things we do." It's worldly wisdom, born again. It's bringing God down to earth, it's leaving the mother ship because faith works best when we go out on our shore excursions. Life is all about shore excursions, it's about facing the difficult decisions and trying to do the right thing and after we've done them not sure it was the right thing we did. That's God's revelation and reason. It's being born again. It's looking past the shallow pursuit of what is popular to do, what is faithful to the God who created the earth and did not leave it. For God so loved the world, John said, that Jesus said, God so loved the world, born again, down to earth, worldly wisdom. Jesus taught it, revelation in reason, God in the usual, truth in the ordinary, integrity every step we take on our own. We take our minds and use them.

Nicodemus was a teacher. He came to see the rabbi in the dark of night. Jesus taught born from above, the logic of love, God in every person is a majority. Some say "Whatever it takes." The logic of love. Jesus taught born again, the wisdom of the world, the glory of God, it's integrity. Out on our own. Never alone. Always do what is right. Revelation in

reason. Jesus taught eternal life. He taught the truth, and we, like Nicodemus, we come to hear it. Nicodemus, late at night in the dark. We come every Sunday, and we listen, and sometimes we're not sure we get it. And that's okay, because it's called eternal life.

Gennethe another, born from above, born again. We don't get it, always. We don't. But we take our minds and use them, knowing that in fact to get it takes a lifetime, takes a lifetime