

Have you ever been asked or have you ever asked someone if they are “born again?” Or if you are born again? I know that there are some here who are very comfortable answering that question while there are others here who get a little squirmy and don’t quite know how to respond. My experience is that this question is asked of me by people who don’t really know me.

I think about the so called “Harcomb preacher” when I was in college who used to stand in front of the main cafeteria and yell at all of us students that we needed to be born again or that we were all going to hell. He didn’t know me. Didn’t know anything about me. I was simply another notch in his Bible of people he was trying to save. Or I think about the well meaning young adult I encountered in Central America who asked me that question on a bus ride through the mountains of Guatemala. Are you born again?

That question originates from the Scripture we are about to read. But in this Scripture we are about to read we are going to be introduced to a man named Nicodemus who misunderstands what Jesus is talking to him about. And I wonder if a lot of the Christians today who ask people if they are born again have a misunderstanding of this passage as well.

So what we are going to do today is we are going to try to walk through this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus in order to get a better understanding of what Jesus may have meant and what the gospel writer John meant in the way he tells this story. There is a lot in this passage that gets overlooked or watered down.

Also, this is a passage in which there is not one meaning but actually different meanings. The Greek language allows for multiple meanings. But our English language forces us to make choices that the original writer of John does not want us to make.

So let’s read this story which comes from John 3:1-21

(vs 1) Nicodemus is a Pharisee. There were 3 branches of Judaism at the time of the New Testament. There were Pharisees, there were Sadducees, and there were Essenes. The Essenes do not get mentioned in the Bible directly. The Pharisees are portrayed negatively by the gospel writers but they were probably not as bad as the writers made them out to be. But Nicodemus is a Pharisee. Pharisees are seen as people who were very much rule followers. And Nicodemus is a leader. Probably a member of the Sanhedrin which was the ruling council for Jerusalem.

(vs. 2) Next we notice that Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. The thing about the gospel of John is that light and darkness are not just literal. John uses these images of day and night to make a literary point. So pay attention to that. Night or darkness represents separation from God or confusion.

Notice that he calls him “rabbi” so he comes to a teacher looking for answers.

Next we notice that Nicodemus is impressed by the “signs of Jesus.” This is another word that the gospel of John uses to give us a clue about Nicodemus. Anyone who is impressed by “signs” in the gospel is someone who does not have a very deep faith. They are impressed by the things that Jesus does rather than who Jesus is. Nicodemus has a faith based on “signs.”

(vs. 3) The translation I read which is the NRSV translation says that Jesus says to Nicodemus that he must be “born from above.” The translation in the pew, the NIV, says that he must be “born again.” Other translations say that he must be “born anew.” So which is it? Which is the correct translation? This is where our English language restricts the meaning of the text.

In the Greek language which is what is the original language of this Scripture, all three of these translations are correct. Nicodemus is told that he must be born anew, born from above, and born again. But English Bible translators have to choose which one of these translations they are going to accept and discard the others or relegate these other translations to the footnote.

So what does this phrase mean? To be born anew or to be born from above means being able to see things from a different point of view. So what does that mean? When you look at your life and events in your life and you view events in this world from a human point of view, you have a very limited and skewed perspective. If you remain distant from God's view of things, then you become anxious and fearful or narrow just like Nicodemus. In our first reading, Paul says that to do this is to live by the flesh.

But to be born anew and born from above, means learning how to see things closer from God's point of view. Moving toward God's point of view leaves us feeling less anxious and fearful and more open minded. Moving toward God's point of view means learning to trust that God is working in a faithful way in our lives and in the world to bring about redemption.

There is a scene in the movie *Dead's Poet Society* in which actor Robin Williams is playing a English teacher at a boys boarding school. Williams invites his students to get out of their seats and stand on their desks. He wants them to view the class from a different point of view. As the students stand on the desks, you can see in their eyes astonishment at how the classroom looks different because they view it from a different perspective.

Read vs. 11-15

But Nicodemus can't quite catch that meaning what Jesus is trying to teach him. Verse 11 begins a pretty elaborate explanation by Jesus that may lose us. But then we get to verse 16 which is one of if not the most famous verse in all of the Bible. And this verse gives us a clue on what it means to view life on earth from the viewpoint of God.

Read vs. 16-17

There are some people who shy away from this text because they have seen this verse used as a weapon. Believe in Jesus or you are going to hell. But if we read this text in light of the rest of story of Nicodemus, we see that this is not a verse of condemnation but a verse of freedom. Seeking to view the world through God's eyes means a release of whatever fear and anxiety or grief or narrowness we may have.

I am personally thankful for renewal in my life that I am experiencing. For me, I am thankful for some people in my life that are helping me to view my life through a different perspective.

(reinforced last night singing in my home church with my old youth group)

The invitation is there for all of us to begin to view things with a different set of eyes. To allow the Holy Spirit to transform you and to begin to see things from a more godly point of view. You don't have to be scared of being born anew or from above or being born again. Everyday is a new opportunity to move from seeing life from a human point of view toward more of a godly point of view.

Am you born again? You can be born again each and every day. The same opportunity exists for all of us. AMEN.

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-Text: John 3: 1-21 and Romans 8:12-17

-Given: June 3, 2012 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)