

Our Greatest Gift

John 3:1-7, 14-21

March 22, 2009

I.

Today's Gospel is one of the most well-known stories in the bible. It recounts the nighttime conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, and it goes right to the core of our Christian beliefs and doctrines. But first, some background.

The setting is Jerusalem during the Passover. It could have been the night of the same day that Jesus caused a ruckus in the temple as we heard last week. John would have been there when Nicodemus arrived, and would have witnessed what he wrote in his Gospel.

The reading begins with Jesus being questioned by Nicodemus, a wealthy Pharisee who lived in Jerusalem. And we remember from many sermons and teachings that Pharisees were the Jewish sect that often challenged and criticized Jesus in the New Testament. Perhaps that's why Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He didn't want his Jewish colleagues to see him.

And that could have been because Nicodemus was no ordinary Pharisee. He seemed interested in what Jesus had to say, and recognized that Jesus had come from God. Later in John's Gospel he came to Jesus' defense when the crowds were divided about whether to arrest him (7:50-52). He also helped bury Jesus' body after the crucifixion (19:39).

We can draw three principles from what Jesus said to Nicodemus. The first is that we must be born from above to enter the kingdom of God. The second is that God loves us so much that he gave Jesus, his only Son, so that we might have that opportunity to be reborn. And the third is that those who do not accept Jesus in this way are condemned to judgment. So there's good news and bad news. Let's look at them in more detail.

II.

First, Jesus said no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from above. Some Bibles, notably the old King James version, translate that as "being born again." Both are correct. John wrote his Gospel in Greek, the literary language of the time, and he used a word with no English counterpart that could mean either born again or born from above, or both.

This confused Nicodemus who was thinking in terms of physical birth, and he asked how a person's mother could give birth to the same person twice. Jesus, however, was speaking of spirituality rather than obstetrics, and then he said in the next verse that we must be born of both water and the Spirit to enter God's kingdom.

And here I briefly should address the term "born again" because some churches regard it negatively, while in other churches a flash-bang born again experience is required for membership.

This reminds me of the story about a man who owned a barber shop, and joined a fundamentalist church that proclaimed right up front that you either were born again or going straight to hell.

Well, one Sunday his pastor told him that it was his Christian duty to proclaim this doctrine of salvation in Christ to his customers during the week and try to convert them. After all, they would be stuck in the barbers' chair and he would have a captive audience.

Well, being new to the church he was a little self-conscious, and on Monday several customers came in for haircuts, but he didn't say a thing. Finally he got his courage up when someone sat down for a shave. And after he finished sharpening the razor on the strap, he moved in front of the chair with the razor still in hand, and loudly asked, "Are you ready to die?"

Some born again advocates can come off that way, and although the basic theology of those churches is consistent with Scripture, their beliefs can seem dogmatic. Yes, we do have to be born again, but I believe it can be more effectively presented as a promise rather than a threat.

And there are other differences in how the doctrine of spiritual birth is understood. Roman Catholics generally believe that spiritual birth occurs with baptism. The view of Reformed theology is that spiritual birth is predestined, and certain people have been selected by God for salvation even before they are born. Nothing we do can change that heavenly decision.

In the Episcopal church, we believe spiritual birth comes after baptism, and occurs when we experience a saving faith. It happens when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Then we embark on a spiritual journey where our belief takes root, the Holy Spirit shows forth through us in our lives, we are born again, and by the Spirit the Bible is revealed as the living Word.

And this process might occur in a moment, but more likely it builds and develops over time. The end result is birth of water and Spirit as described by Jesus in today's reading.

And here is an interesting digression. Jesus also said that just as Moses lifted up the serpent to offer salvation to those bitten by snakes, he also would be lifted up to offer salvation from the serpents of sin. This story of Moses and his staff with a serpent was in today's Old Testament reading, and it forms the symbol that is used today by the American Medical Association, emergency medical services, and other medical organizations.

III.

But, back to the reading, and to the second point Jesus made. It's probably the most frequently quoted chapter and verse in the Bible. John 3:16. We see it on signs at sporting events and public gatherings. It's on bumper stickers, license plates, and tee shirts. Sometimes it's just the numbers, 3:16. Sometimes it's quoted. It says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

And belief in Jesus in this sense is the same as faith in Jesus. The words are interchangeable. Belief in things that cannot be proven by human standards is faith. The book of Hebrews tells us that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). And St. Paul said in 1 Corinthians that faith is God's gift through the Holy Spirit (12:9).

This means that faith comes to us through God's grace. It is not something we can create or manufacture through our own efforts other than to respond in our humble acceptance of God's gift of salvation in Christ. And we accept through our heads and receive in our hearts.

With our heads we can make a decision to open ourselves to Jesus by doing things such as reading the Bible, coming to church, and helping others in need. That's a start.

But the faith we seek goes beyond these objective things, and makes itself known in our hearts. Through God's response to us in his grace, we receive a life-giving energy that works within us as we acknowledge Christ's saving work on the cross. This leads to an attitude of hope for the future that helps us live with confidence in newness and fullness of life. We accept dependence on the activity of God in Christ. And through this transformation we know God's peace.

And there also are some things we know are not faith. Faith is not like a spare tire, only to be used in emergencies. Faith is not like a bus or train, only to be ridden when it goes your way. It's not a light switch, to be turned off and on. And, most importantly, faith is not like an insurance policy, something to have just in case everything you hear in church turns out to be true.

Faith acts in our lives by causing us to believe truths about God for which we have no evidence, but which are no less real merely because we cannot touch or see or fully understand them. And these realities include God's promise of salvation through Jesus Christ, and God's absolute trustworthiness in fulfilling that promise. That's the truth of John 3:16.

IV.

But what happens to those who do not believe? This is the third point Jesus made to Nicodemus, and it's the dark side of the message of light in the Gospel. Jesus said that although he did not come to condemn the world, but to save it, nevertheless all who do not believe are condemned by their own failure to accept him.

And talking about judgment and condemnation is not fashionable in some churches. It might be like hearing me scrape my fingers across the blackboard. And it probably isn't something you would mention if you were inviting someone to a church function. As Christians we want to feel good. We want to believe that God loves us, and that our salvation will be found in his love.

Well, that's true, as far as it goes. God's relationship with us truly is grounded in love. Because God loves us he sent his Son to offer salvation. But what if that offer is not accepted? What if it is disregarded, or put off until another day? Jesus also made clear in today's reading that those who do not come into the light he offers are condemning themselves by their unbelief.

And he made this point later in John's Gospel on his final trip to Jerusalem. He said "I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. [But] there is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day" (12:46, 48).

So, we can be comforted by the reality that God's purpose is love and salvation, not judgment and condemnation. Even so, there are eternal consequences for rejecting God's love as he has given it to us through Jesus Christ.

And we, who have heard the Word, are called to act on it before it's too late. This reminds me of the fellow who received a letter from the government advising that because of his death his social security benefits would terminate. The letter then said that the decision would be reconsidered if his circumstances changed. Salvation, however, does not work that way. God gets it right the first time, and reconsideration is not an option.

V.

So, what are we thinking now? Do we see ourselves in the confusion of Nicodemus, or do we understand what Jesus meant? I think most of us accept Jesus' words as he intended, and have committed ourselves to him. Even so, do it again. He wants to deepen his relationship with us.

And if anyone has doubts, do not let it rest. Read scripture again. Come and visit with me. Talk with some of your friends here in church. Pray with those in the loft or back of the church on Sunday. Nicodemus had an excuse. When he met with Jesus the New Testament had not even been written. Jesus was still alive. The crucifixion and resurrection were in the future.

That was part of Nicodemus' problem. He was not able to see how it all fit together. The big picture had not yet been painted. We, however, are in a better position. We have over two thousand years of knowledge, tradition, and guidance that was not available to Nicodemus.

And while many things in the Christian faith are mysteries or cannot be explained in rational terms, the story of salvation is clear. We might not know the details of what the next world will be like, but we do know what we have to do in this world to get there. *Amen.*