

Two Meanings, One Eternal Life

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
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- [John 3:1-17 \(Good News Bible\)](#) ³ Jesus answered, "I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again." ⁴ "How can a grown man be born again?" Nicodemus asked. "He certainly cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time!" ⁵ "I am telling you the truth," replied Jesus, "that no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit."
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: In accepting the gift of the Holy Spirit through discipleship of Jesus the Son God offers us the invitation to be born again/from above, the invitation to enter the Kingdom of God now and experience eternal life in these days.

Today's reading from the Fourth Gospel contains a story that *may* be familiar to you, and it includes a verse that I *know* is familiar to you, if only for the fact that I used that one verse in our worship service just two week ago: the verse that begins "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...."

We normally hear that verse out of context. But that world-famous Bible verse is part of a story about Jesus being approached by a fellow named Nicodemus. As I studied this passage last week I came to understand why Bible scholars and commentators note that though the passage from John Chapter 3 tells of a simple encounter with Jesus and it happens to contain that ultra-familiar Bible verse, in fact this is a complex story that conveys deep, spiritual meaning. Okay, that can be a little intimidating even for a seasoned preacher. But it can also be exciting to discover what may be uncovered in a familiar passage. So let's take a spin at it.

First, the characters. We know Jesus. Actually, that's the purpose of the story: to point out that as disciples – followers – of Jesus we are supposed to know him and trust him and serve him with the entirety of our lives. So Jesus is one character in the story.

The other character is a man named Nicodemus. Despite his name of Greek origin which means "victory of the people," ¹ Nicodemus is not Greek. He's Jewish. Very Jewish. He's aligns himself with the traditional Pharisee branch within Judaism, and is probably a member of the Temple's Council – we Presbyterians might think of him as the Jewish equivalent of a ruling elder on the Session.

Right from the start of the story some simple statements tell us a lot. First, Nicodemus seeks out Jesus after dark. Surely he doesn't go at night because that is the only time he could get on Jesus' calendar. It's probably because Nicodemus doesn't want his fellow Council members to see that he is having a secret meeting with that radical upstart Jesus with all his innovative ways of interpreting Jewish scripture.

Nicodemus begins by flattering Jesus. He addresses him as "Rabbi" which is the honored title for a teacher of Jewish scripture. He tells Jesus, "We know that you are a teacher sent by God...." In saying "we" Nicodemus indicates that not just he but the party of the Pharisees recognize Jesus as a teacher; that's a respected status. What's more, Nicodemus acknowledges

¹ <http://www.sheknows.com/baby-names/name/nicodemus> accessed 5/22/2018

that Jesus' charisma, his ability to interpret scripture, his mighty works are signs that God is with him.

How does Jesus respond to the flattery? Jesus responds with an answer to a question Nicodemus didn't ask.

Jesus says, "I am telling you the truth." (Some translations express that as "Truly, truly I say to you" or "Verily I say unto you." You know the actual Greek words being translated: they are "*Amen amen lego...*" No fooling!) So after Nicodemus has said, in effect, "Nice to meet you," Jesus responds, "I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born *again/from above.*"

Let me slow that down. When the gospel writer originally wrote this passage in Greek he used a word that doesn't have an equivalent in English. The Greek word (*ανοτηεν anothēn*) has two meanings: "again" and "from above." The Greek word stands for both meanings at the same time. English doesn't have a similar word, so Bible translators have to make a choice. In many translations including the one we usually use here, the translators chose *one* of the meanings to use in the story, like "born again" and then in a footnote they explain that it *also* means "born from above."

Nicodemus is no dummy. But he doesn't get that Jesus is speaking metaphorically, that when he says born again/from above he's speaking of a spiritual dimension of existence. No, Nicodemus takes Jesus literally. That's why he comments about the impossibility of entering a mother's womb to be born a second time.

Jesus sees that his words just zoomed right past Nicodemus. So Jesus rephrases his point: "I am telling you the truth... [*αμεν αμεν λεγο Amen amen lego...*]" that no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

His instructions about getting to heaven bring to mind a story about the legendary preacher Billy Graham.

Early in his preaching career, Billy Graham led a revival in a South Carolina town. Before the service started, he wanted to mail a letter. So he asked a child for directions to the post office. After the boy had given him directions, Graham said, "If you come to Central Baptist Church tonight, I'll tell you how to get to heaven."

The boy replied, "No thanks. You don't even know how to get to the post office."²

So Jesus says, "I am telling you the truth... that no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

The Scottish minister and author William Barclay notes how this story follows a pattern common to this gospel:

- A person asks a question
- Jesus gives a hard-to-understand answer
- The person misunderstands
- Jesus answers even more cryptically
- A discourse follows³

And it's the discourse by Jesus that's the point of the story. Here John the Evangelist—the gospel writer—presents Jesus explaining the consequence and blessing inherent in being his disciple, in accepting his love and following his way.

² "Asking for Directions" by Matthew Laney in online resources *StillSpeaking Daily Devotional* for May 27, 2018 at www.ucc.org, accessed 5/27/2018

³ SermonWriter May 27 (Trinity) John 3:1-17, citing Barclay, William, *The Daily Study Bible, "The Gospel of John," Vol. 1*, Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1955, 113

Some Christians believe that Jesus is requiring a “moment of decision” in which a person makes a choice to follow Jesus and thus secures one’s blessing of an “eternal life” to be received after one’s physical life draws to a close. Some Christians believe that moment of decision constitutes the moment when a person is “born again,” and if you’ve *not* made a deliberate declaration to accept Jesus, you’ve not been “born again.” Some Christians believe that if you’ve not experienced a specific, memorable moment of decision, you will not enter eternal life when you die.

But the way “eternal life” is presented in this gospel, it’s meant to “describe the change in human existence wrought by faith in Jesus.” Eternal life is not a reward that awaits us when we die; rather, John’s gospel says that eternal life is a changed life that comes over us as we live our lives *now* for God’s will, as we learn to live not solely for our own desires. As a Bible scholar observed, “To have eternal life is to live life no longer defined by... the will of the flesh or by human will, but [to live life as defined by the will of] God.”⁴ Living by our primitive instincts or living to fulfill our calculated, self-serving desires is a dead-end existence; it’s like dying to the blessings that God offers.

So John’s gospel proclaims that “Eternal life is not something held in abeyance until the believer’s future, but begins in the believer’s present.”⁵ When Jesus says that all who believe in him may not die but “have eternal life,”

the word “have” is present tense, suggesting that believers possess it in the here and now rather than having to wait for some future inheritance. This is [the gospel writer’s theology of what faith in Jesus offers: an] already-received gift—eternal life as relationship with God beginning now.⁶

That’s why I and many other Christians understand this passage about being “born again” differently from the way it’s viewed by people who would call themselves “Born Again” Christians. Jesus tells Nicodemus that “no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he [or she] is born of water and the Spirit.” Realize this: being born is not something we do to ourselves; it’s something God initiates. This is true both in our physical birth and our spiritual rebirth. Jesus says that it’s God, not us, who initiates our rebirth by “water and the Spirit.” The water is not only a reference to the waters of physical birth but also the waters of baptism, a symbol of God’s gift of welcoming and including us among God’s family. And the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—the Holy Spirit coming into us—that is not something that we can initiate or control. Rather the Spirit is the undeserved gift of God’s presence with us, God’s care for us.

It’s with all this build-up that the author of the gospel explains why God offers us the invitation to be born again/from above, the invitation to enter the Kingdom of God now and experience eternal life in these days. We’re offered the opportunity to align our living with God’s will for Creation because “God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. For God did not send [the] Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its savior.”⁷

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⁴ New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX: Luke-John. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 552b

⁵ New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX: Luke-John. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 552b

⁶ SermonWriter: May 27 (Trinity) John 3:1-17

⁷ John 3:16-17 Good News Translation