

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“CHANGED LIVES - NICODEMUS”
John 3:1-17
February 17, 2008
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services**

Are you open to receive a word from God about your life? Nicodemus was and he did. He received that message from Jesus.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He wanted to talk with Jesus, but he didn't want his neighbors to know. After all, Nicodemus was a very important religious official, and Jesus, at this time, was very unpopular with religious officials. Now he could have worn a mask when he came to see Jesus, like the ones the youth had down stairs last Sunday, but that would have looked kind of strange. So he came to Jesus at night, when it was very dark. After all, how would it look for a member of the Jewish ruling council to seek out an itinerant preacher from Galilee? But Nicodemus was an apparently earnest man. So he said to Jesus, ***“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”*** Quite a statement for a man of his stature in the community!

Jesus responded by saying, ***“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”***

Not exactly what Nicodemus expected. Like most of us he had to be wondering to himself, ***“What’s this man talking about? What does it mean to be born again?”***

So Nicodemus asked, ***“How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”***

Nicodemus was like so many of those who read the Bible today; he took Jesus’ reply quite literally. As a member of the rabbinical class, Nicodemus was surely familiar with Scripture passages like Ezekiel 36: 26-27-- ***“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Holy Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”*** (2)

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus explains, ***“no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”***

But bewildered, Nicodemus asked, ***“How can this be?”***

Jesus said, ***“You are Israel’s teacher, and do you not understand these things?”***

Nicodemus was confused and Jesus knew it. But aren’t we as well; at least some of us? The Bible can be a confusing book at times. And this matter of being ***“born again”*** is about as confusing as anything you are going to encounter in scripture. The new birth is one of those subjects that cross the theological divide. Each theological grouping in our land has a different interpretation of the new birth that Jesus calls for, and even within those theological groupings, there are differences, some of which are cultural.

Garrison Keillor told a wonderful story on his PBS radio show recently that illustrates this theological diversity.

The show was broadcast from Columbus, Georgia. Keillor described a man who had moved to Lake Wobegon from Columbus, which is in the deep South. The man found work at a bakery and soon captivated the town with his peach pastries and southern hospitality. The whole town was becoming friendlier through his influence.

But over time, his personality changed. He became obsessed with the end of the world and his need for salvation. One day in desperation, he appeared at the Lutheran church and inquired of the pastor what to do to be saved.

This threw the Lutheran pastor for a loop. He didn't normally do altar calls. People are supposed to take care of salvation on their own time.

Since this was happening in late November, the church didn't have time anyway. It just didn't fit into the busy Advent schedule. You know how busy Advent can be for Liturgical Churches.

But the story became more complicated. Over the coming months the man continued his pursuit of the kind of salvation he had seen happen in the lives of people in Columbus, Georgia. He wanted to be baptized by immersion. Unfortunately there wasn't a tub in Lake Wobegon big enough for a submersion, and by this time it was January and the lake was frozen over. So our desperate man had to return to Columbus, GA to care for his salvation. (2)

Minnesota Lutherans and South Georgia Baptists simply don't look at salvation in the same way. That's a fact. ***"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."*** Confusing words!

Many of you will remember when Former President Jimmy Carter faced this confusion when he labeled himself a ***"born again"*** Christian. The confusion around this concept of a new birth is nothing new; let's try to make some sense out of it this morning.

What exactly did Christ mean when he said, **"No one can see the**

kingdom of God unless he is born again”? Did he mean that you can’t get into heaven without some kind of specific conversion experience? For many Christians, this is what being **“born again”** is all about. On a certain date, I had a specific experience of God and I was **“saved.”** Now that is a valid interpretation of this text; however, it is not the only one.

Teaching and preaching about the Kingdom of God was central to Jesus’ ministry. Many of his parables were about the Kingdom. He described the kingdom as a mustard seed which is planted in the ground and which grows into an enormous tree. He described it as leaven which a woman puts into a loaf of bread, as a pearl of great price for which a person will sell everything he owns, as treasure hidden in a field. The main task of the church, Jesus said, is to tell about the Kingdom.

Jesus went as far as saying, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:60) Even after his resurrection, Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God.” (Acts 1:3)

The Kingdom of God is anywhere God reigns. Jesus said on one occasion, **“The Kingdom is within you.”** (Luke 17:21) On another he said, **“You are not far from the Kingdom.”** (Mark 12:34) He even taught his disciples to pray, **“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven . . .”** The kingdom is here. The kingdom is now.

What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is that in order to enter into the kingdom of God you need to experience some profound changes in the way you think and the way you feel. You need to open yourself to a new level of devotion, a new capacity for love, a new set of eyes by which to see the world--eyes filled with compassion and acceptance and forgiveness. He is saying to Nicodemus what God said through Ezekiel: **“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you . . .”**

This is far from any particular emotional experience, or any timetable for this experience. Oh, it may happen in an instance as it did with Paul, or it may happen over the course of many years, as it did with Simon Peter, or it may take a lifetime as it has with many saints over the

centuries.

Here is the critical point: entrance into this kingdom is very desirable. It is the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in a field. *“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit . . .”*

The Kingdom of God is anywhere God reigns. It is available to you, right here and right now! What an incredible promise God has made. Once God’s Kingdom is established in your heart, you can experience a peace and a joy that no one can take away.

We don’t know if Nicodemus answered Jesus’ call to a new life. The story ends with him puzzling over the rabbi’s instructions. Here’s what he may have missed: new eyes which see the beauty of this world, a new appreciation of the joy of being alive, the peace of trusting a loving heavenly Father concerned about his every need. All of this is available to those who open themselves to God’s Spirit.

I would love to help you to see the kingdom of God in its fullness. Yes, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.

1. Richards, Lawrence O., *The 365-Day Devotional Commentary* (Colorado Springs: ChariotVictor Pub., 1990), p. 766.

2. Bishop Richard Looney, *Foundation for Evangelism Newsletter*.