

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, March 12, 2017)

Text: **Matthew 5:21-37 (*The Message*)**

There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said, "Rabbi, we all know you're a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren't in on it."

Jesus said, "You're absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it's not possible to see what I'm pointing to—to God's kingdom."

"How can anyone," said Nicodemus, "be born who has already been born and grown up? You can't re-enter your mother's womb and be born again. What are you saying with this 'born-from-above' talk?"

Jesus said, "You're not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the 'wind-hovering-over-the-water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. When you look at a baby, it's just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can't see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit.

"So don't be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be 'born from above'—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the wind of God, the Spirit of God."

Nicodemus asked, "What do you mean by this? How does this happen?"

Jesus said, "You're a respected teacher of Israel and you don't know these basics? Listen carefully. I'm speaking sober truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes. There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God?"

"No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **“Born from Above – Integrating Love”**

What is it to be born anew? Is it some strange hit on the head where we're brought to our knees in a conversion experience? Is it accepting Jesus as our own personal Lord and savior? Is it curling ourselves into a fetal position and trying to have a back-to-the-womb experience?

More than any of these, I think it is to be reborn in our thinking. Even those of us raised in the church, steeped in the gospel, and fed daily by the Word of God need to constantly be awakened to the NEW that Christ is creating. We need to be drawn out of the routine and deadening thoughts that keep us from experiencing that which God is creating anew every day. We are born from ABOVE, Jesus tells us. The Spirit that alights upon our heads at Pentecost will go out quickly if we don't continue to realize its presence and feed and nurture that flame with our energy and search for "new fuel."

To me, Nicodemus, the central character in our text for today, is a wonderful representation of our dual nature - beings born below, earthbound as we are, and those born above, spirits born by the wind of God.

That first side of us - the very human, earthbound self is the one that clings to reason, often questioning, wondering, and doubting all that comes our way. This is not a BAD part of us by any means. In fact, it's definitely very much a part of who we are. It's these very attributes that help to keep us alive and aware. But if we get stuck there and don't allow ourselves to enter the other side of us - the soul self filled with mystery, embracing the Spirit and knowing that God is ever present and speaking to us in ways we cannot tangentially experience, then we're living a lopsided life, afraid to touch who we really are as we make our way through the cover of darkness.

As Rev. Mark Suriano says, Nicodemus "was given the gift of transcending what he thought he knew to being the one known so closely by God that he was redefined in the process." So that when we open ourselves this way, "we will be opening the possibility that we will encounter a God who will redefine us and transform our believing as well." Are you ready for that?!

Meda Stamper, pastor of Anstey United Reformed Church in England goes even further as she realizes that here, "Jesus shifts the conversation from the smallness of Nicodemus' view to the largeness of life in God, from the signs on which Nicodemus and others base their hope to the invisible mystery of the Spirit/wind (the two words are the same in Greek), which can give him birth into the truth that he is missing.... "When we become too sure of what we know about Jesus," she says, "when we believe that we have grasped him at last, that is when we can perhaps expect to be undone like Nicodemus."

You see, Life must be about transformation. Stagnation and the unwillingness to allow the Spirit to lead us into the largeness of life, the great unknown, can only result in pain, misery and the feeling that "there's just got to be more." Ask, seek, be still, and LISTEN for the Spirit's voice.

I think most of us here today can identify with Nicodemus more than many of the people Jesus comes in contact with during his ministry. As Kate Huey puts it, Nicodemus is "A respected leader," and "probably lives a comfortable life in material terms." "He may not know physical hunger," she says, "but his spiritual hunger drives him to Jesus in the dark of night, when many of us wrestle with questions and doubts, and face our deepest needs."

And this is where Jesus brings to him and to us the idea of being born "from above." Yes, we are flesh and bone and mostly water ("born of water" as Jesus says), but what truly makes us who we are, I believe, is born from above. The spirit that dwells within our bodies comes from God and will return to God and even now is with God though housed in this fleshly form.

That doesn't mean we must deny, desecrate or denigrate this beautiful House of God, which is our body; just the opposite. We must HONOR this dwelling place, bring it into balance with who we are as Spirits. The integration of body (water) and spirit is exactly what I think Jesus gave us as a prime example and what he's talking about here with Nic - at night.

I refuse to believe the God who created us in these miraculous bodies is asking us to eschew or deny our physical form. I think, rather, that God Calls us to bring everything we are into a full, abundant, LARGE expression that can heal, transform and bring LOVE to every aspect of creation. “Very truly I tell you,” Jesus says later in this very Gospel of John, “whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these.”

And what is GREATER than LOVE? Nothing. Not one single thing. It is through love that God gives us one of the most beautiful verses ever. For God so loved the world...

And even though I’ve heard and recited this verse at least a couple of thousand times in my life, I realize that I, like Nicodemus, need to wake up, to come out of my earthbound thinking and allow the Spirit to transform what I have always taken from this verse; indeed, what many of our more conservative brethren would still hold to. That is the idea that this verse points to the exclusivity of God – a given mark that unless you believe THIS way, in the Jesus I believe in, then you just ain’t gonna make it, man.

This week I received a very long letter from a gentleman who drove past our church this week and was very disturbed by our rainbow doors proclaiming that “God’s Doors are Open to All.” Au contraire he stated with many proof-texting verses of just why God only loves a few people and not all. “I decided I needed to tell you the truth, in love, Pastor,” he stated. But all I got from it was a miserable soul who felt in his self-righteousness that he knew God’s heart better than I and that his interpretation trumped any open door policy we believe God has. Sad.

God so loved the world as to give the Only Begotten One, that whoever believes may not die, but have eternal life.

I choose to stand in the openness of God’s hand. I’ll take the transforming idea of Michael Joseph Brown any day when he says, “Most important in this verse is that God loved the world. God deeply loved the world that God had created, and God longs for this creation to live — to live in its fullness and authentically. It is not only some subset of people — who describe themselves as God’s own people — whom God will save... It is the entire world that God has loved, precisely by having given God’s only Child.”

“...who among us hasn't yearned to know that "all of this"--our lives, our world, with both our struggles and our hopes--springs from love?” Kate Matthews wrote in her column “Glimpses of Grace” this week. “The same verse that has been used by some to judge us is actually reassuring us about where "all of this" comes from: a God who loves the world (not the church, as one person has reminded us, but the world) so much that only God's own Beloved Son was a good enough gift for us.”

You are loved by God! Don’t be afraid to question, don’t be afraid to doubt, but DO look deeper, DO allow every part of you to be present in your seeking and in your receiving and know that you are loved through every part and piece of it. Transform. Live large. Love with everything you are, body and soul, and know that you, in return, are loved deeply.

I’d like to conclude today’s explorations by allowing you to sit in as I talk with our friend Nic for a moment today...

Confusion is the unintended consequence of your curiosity, Nicodemus, but don’t stop there. Think about it: if you are born again, then you must grow up again. Think about your life, Nicodemus. What would you do differently if you had half the chance? How would you grow up differently? How would you re-edit the narrative of your life? As you enter more deeply into your puzzlement, Nicodemus, you’ll find that Jesus is inviting you to be curious about your life, and to rethink your assumptions with an altered perspective. You are challenged not only to conduct an autopsy on your past, but to look to the future through the eyes of redemptive possibility. How might your life be

different if you were born again? How would your life be altered if you truly believed, from the beginning, that God loves you with a sacrificial love?

Nicodemus, patron saint of the curious, we see you in the flickering lamplight, your face an arresting mixture of confusion and interest. Jesus waits, the silence broken only by the sound of the wind banging the shutter against the house. You tug at your beard and rethink your life, seeing your past and future through the eyes of the One who loves you. You are dizzy with the possibility of it all. And so are we. Born again? The mere thought of it sweeps through us and sends us reeling. You mean to tell us that our lives might be different?

God, may your mystery surround us and your light shine on us. May your Spirit explore with us and be our companion. May what we do not understand send us on a journey with you today. Amen.