

“Born of the Spirit”

John 3:1-17

Richard C. Allen

March 12, 2017

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

You have to love Nicodemus! His child-like innocence is precious to behold. Told he must be born a second time, all he can imagine is crawling into his mother’s uterus and repeating the journey through the birth canal and out into broad daylight. He is what we refer to as a literalist. He sees the world as Sergeant Friday used to see it: “just the facts; just the facts.”

Yet, there is something about Nicodemus that finds literalism to be unsatisfying, unfulfilling, failing to quench his thirst for spiritual insight. He sees himself as a scholar, but he has a hunch there is a poet within him. He finds himself seeking out Jesus under cover of darkness. He may not be able to articulate what it is he is seeking. He just knows there is more to life than what is perfectly obvious. There is more to life than what lies upon the surface. He is hungry for more. This makes Nicodemus an ideal student! A teacher can work with a student who is hungry to go deeper!

Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born from above if he ever expects to see the Kingdom of God. We can picture Nicodemus scratching his head; giving Jesus that look that says, “What are you, from Mars?” So, Jesus begins gently to open up this subject. What does it mean to be born of the spirit? I’d like to share with you how I have come to answer this question.

For me, to be born of the spirit is to become conscious of the part of myself that is made by God for relating to God.

I remember the day when I became conscious of the part of me that God made for relating to girls! It was a wonderful day! We played spin the bottle! And Lorraine Nunez kissed me!

I remember the day I became conscious of the part of me that God made for playing tennis. I'll never forget that day! I hit a backhand cross court that gave me goose bumps all over my body!

And I remember a day when I became conscious that there is a part of me that is made by God for relating to God. Believe it or not, it was in a high school English class. Mr. Burnham passed out a list of topics from which we could choose one for our term paper. I chose the topic, "Man does not live by bread alone." By hindsight, I see that this topic chose me! Like Nicodemus, I started by taking the words literally. I wrote about needing more than bread; needing hamburgers and French fries and ice cream. I was probably in a deep sleep when it came to me that there is a deeper meaning here. And so I began to ponder what else do I need to be truly alive. That term paper was an awakening. I became aware that I have a soul, that I have a need to love and to be loved, that there really is a God who has something in mind for me. Though I wasn't crazy about Mr. Burnham at the time, he is now on my short list of people for whom I am truly grateful. He is no longer living, but he is, in a way, alive in my heart. His term paper assignment helped me to see there is a part of me made by God for relating to God.

For me, to be born of the spirit is to see, finally, what I had been kept from seeing. Like so many of us, Nicodemus walked through life with blinders on, seeing what was profitable for him to see; NOT seeing what God needed him to see. I was raised in a homophobic culture. We learned to use terms such as faggot and dike and homo; all terms intending to rob someone of their humanity. I was seeing only what my culture wanted me to see. Then, my cousin, Steve, came out of the closet.

Then, I met Bill Donovan. Then Pam and Jane. Then Kate. Then Minh. Then so many other gay and lesbian people who worshiped the same God, who found inspiration in the same Christ, who called upon the same Holy Spirit for comfort.

I began to see what God needed me to see; that all God's children have a place in the choir, some sing low, some sing higher, some sing out loud on the telephone wire, some just clap their hands. I began to see that all God's children are made in the Divine image; that all God's children are valued and needed and affirmed.

When Nicodemus finished that late night conversation with Jesus, he was already beginning to see what God needed him to see; namely, that there is the Law of Moses, but there is also the Law of Love. There is the authority of the Prophets, but there is also the authority of personal experience. There is the Law of Hammurabi but there is also the Law of Compassion. For me, to be born of the spirit is to begin to see beyond what my culture teaches; to see what God needs me to see.

For me, to be born of the spirit is to trust that there really is a God who is a force of reconciliation in the world and in my own life. I am not left to my own strength or my own intellect; but there is a God who actively works with me and with others to accomplish the work of reconciliation; that is, the work of enabling people and nations to resolve conflicts such that peace abounds and that intimacy is found or restored.

The most profound religious experiences of my life have been in this category of reconciliation. Resolving a conflict with Mr. Chilengozi, the Biology teacher at my Peace Corps school, meant the world to me. Resolving a conflict with a Jewish dormitory mate at my boarding school absolutely set me free. Reconnecting with my father after a messy divorce, was like a breath of fresh air.

And none of the above had to do with my own brilliance or my own genius. They all had to do with the Force of Reconciliation we call God, working with me and with others.

I am guessing that Nicodemus had a number of unreconciled conflicts. He may not have been able to name them, but he carried them with him to his late night encounter with Jesus. He may have had a falling out with a colleague, or a falling out with his older brother, or a falling out with his next-door neighbor. We aren't told the specifics. Jesus looks Nicodemus in the eye, and what he sees is a man desperately in need of being born of the spirit, desperately needing to trust there is a God whose energy is available for this work of reconciliation.

“Nicodemus, you must be born of the spirit.” Some translations say, “born from above.” Some say, “born again.” Some say, “born anew.”

There are many in the more fundamentalist churches who will claim to know the correct definition of what it means to be born of the spirit. I have shared with you what these words of Jesus have meant to me. It is for each of us to place ourselves in Nicodemus' shoes, and to hear these words from Jesus, and to wrestle with what it might mean for me, for you, to be born of the spirit. It's in the wrestling with this question that we find ourselves living in the greatest of hope. Amen.