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The Born Again Perspective

It's not uncommon for preachers to get feedback that their congregations get more out of their children's sermons than their regular sermons

I'm not sure if people like the simplicity of the message, or perhaps the length, but in my first call I would get lots of comments as people walked out the door like "I got so much out of the children's sermon again, thank you!"

Children's sermons often try to make very accessible points in a very short amount of time and in language that will speak to the ages of the young people

This does not mean, AT ALL, that pastors "dumb down" our message – rather I, and hopefully my fellow colleagues, try to imagine what kids their age can grasp and tell the stories and teach the lessons as best we can in a way they will engage

As I read our gospel message for this morning, it seems to me that this is what Jesus is telling Nicodemus to do as well – take the perspective of someone born anew

Nicodemus is described in the text as a Pharisee – what this information tells us is that Nicodemus is well-educated specifically in the teachings of the Jewish faith

In the hierarchy of people in the church, Nicodemus is towards the top

To get his title he likely had to go to school and pass certain levels of knowledge

Often the Pharisees are depicted as some of Jesus' nemeses in the gospels largely because as the keepers of the faith, as they saw themselves, Jesus was an instigator

Where was *his* diploma? Where did *he* study? Who gave *him* authority to speak about such things?

But Nicodemus comes to Jesus, and he comes to Jesus at night – which, could be about not wanting his colleagues to see him visit Jesus, or perhaps more metaphorical: Nicodemus was a bit “in the dark” as the expression goes

Nicodemus comes to Jesus because he saw one of the signs that Jesus had performed and it started to convince him that maybe, just maybe Jesus is a chosen one of God

And, it's in acknowledging this much to Jesus that then Jesus responds to Nicodemus by saying “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (vs. 3)

Understandably, Nicodemus is confused and wonders how one can be born again to which Jesus responds in more seemingly symbolic language about needing to be born of water and Spirit, what is is flesh is flesh what is spirit is spirit...

It seems the more they speak to each other the more “in the dark” Nicodemus remains

Are we to be born again?

I can't even say those words without a slight chill going down my back

I didn't grow up in a faith that talked about being “born again” but it has been a narrative of Christianity and politics for most of my life and usually connotes a conservativeness to which I don't connect

“Born again” identities often connote an individual’s acceptance of Jesus as their Lord and Savior and a certain adherence to beliefs and practices that are right and keep you in that right relationship with Jesus and God

But in this narrative with Nicodemus, is that what Jesus means by being “born from above”?

John, the author of the text, doesn’t make it so clear

But as I look at what Nicodemus represents – hierarchy, religious purity, religious power – and when I think about what being “Born again” typically means in our culture – hierarchy, religious purity, religious power – it doesn’t make sense to me that Jesus would be saying “you need to be reborn into exactly who you currently are”

I wonder if Jesus’ call to being “born from above,” to being born again, is more about letting go of hierarchy, purity, and rigid power?

I wonder if Jesus is asking Nicodemus to not approach faith as an expert, but as a child – with awe, openness, vulnerability, and hunger

This is much like the Zen Buddhist concept of Shoshin – the Beginner's Mind – where one is to approach the world from the perspective of a beginner not an expert

The late Shunryu Suzuki, a Zen Buddhist monk and teacher, wrote about the concept of Shoshin in his book *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*: “If your mind is empty ... it is open to everything. In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s mind there are few.”¹

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¹ Quote from: <https://www.betterup.com/blog/beginners-mind#:~:text=today%2C%20from%20BetterUp,-.What%20is%20a%20beginner's%20mind%3F,time%20you%20are%20seeing%20it>.

That, to me, sounds more like the message I hear Jesus giving Nicodemus

Jesus seems to say “Nicodemus, as a great leader of the church and in the role you are playing, you have given up any sense of possibility, wonder, awe, openness, vulnerability, and hunger – you need to be born again and take the posture of a child”

Nicodemus is the one who came to Jesus, we need to give him that credit

And, Nicodemus had felt confident in investing in Jesus because of the signs he saw Jesus perform – it confirmed for him what he believed

But, was Nicodemus open to a message or ministry from Jesus beyond what Nicodemus knew and expected?

For Jesus, it's not just the act of turning water into wine that defines him and his ministry, which is likely the “sign” that Nicodemus was talking about that he witnessed, for Jesus it's about generosity and compassion

It's not just that Jesus can heal the sick and suffering that proves he is the Son of God, it's that in God's kin-dom there are no outcasts and untouchables

It's not just that Jesus can raise someone from the dead, it's that he loved his friend beyond the bounds of this world

“For God so loved the world that God gave their only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”

It's about God's love

While there was a spark of something that Nicodemus saw and knew was special about Jesus, Jesus knew that Nicodemus was trying to get Jesus to fit into his conceptions of the world

Jesus knew Nicodemus wouldn't be open to the ministry he had come to fulfill without taking on a different posture – the posture of someone new here, the posture of a child, the posture of a beginner

Which is interesting because none of us ever do what Nicodemus is doing

We never try to make our faith fit into our concepts or timelines - by the way, how's the timing on my sermon? Will we be out of here in an hour?

Having a two-year old in the house, I get a front row seat to that reminder of what it means to see the world through the eyes of a beginner – that wonder, awe, vulnerability, and hunger for learning is so palpable

It becomes very clear to me what I hold on to and need to let go of – like the idea of having a floor clear of trains, cars, and magnetic letters and numbers

And, the things that I hold on to that I want Karsten to experience, too – like the awe of watching the snow fall and stick to the trees

My friends, what if I told you you need to be born again, but not in the way you're thinking?

What if I invited you to take on the posture of someone new here, a child, a beginner

You're invited to let go, or if that's too much, to hold on more loosely than you did before, the things that feel immovable to you and to rediscover God in the simple, pure joys of faith

To rest and wonder in that love that was and is so encompassing that God risked everything to make it known to us

My sermons may not get much shorter, but hopefully my own beginner's posture will be reflected here, too

May this wonder, awe, vulnerability, and hunger bless our Lenten journeys.

Amen.