

(Mis)Understanding Jesus
A Sermon on John 3:1-17
Second Sunday in Lent
March 8, 2020

Introduction

Today's text is about the identity of Jesus. Nicodemus thinks he knows who Jesus is, but his questions show that he doesn't really understand.

John reveals his understanding of the identity of Jesus through this dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus wants Jesus to tell him the easy answer. He wants Jesus to be like one of those preachers who boils it all down and tells you what you need to know. The bulletins in their churches have lots of blanks. The people in the pews fill in the blanks with a pencil as they hear the preacher give the answers in the sermon.

That is not Jesus' style. He encourages us to wrestle with the questions ourselves.

First Move: A Spiritual Rebirth

John's community is in the midst of a family feud. They are followers of Christ who are still in the synagogue. They consider themselves to be righteous Jews. They are feuding with another groups of Jews about the direction that Judaism should take after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.

We know three things about Nicodemus. First, he is a man of the Pharisees. Second, he is a ruler of the Judeans. That means he may be a member of the Sanhedrin. It was the high court of Jerusalem, made up of 71 members, including priests, aristocrats and scribes. The Sanhedrin decided legal and religious disputes.

Third, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Light and darkness are two of the dominant images in the Gospel of John. Jesus is the light who has come into the world. Gail O'Day, a UCC scholar, says that Nicodemus as a Pharisee and a ruler of the Judeans is a public figure. But he does not come publicly to Jesus. We get mixed signals about Nicodemus. Apparently he is afraid or unwilling to come to Jesus openly during the day. He may represent a group of Judeans in the synagogues when the Gospel of John was written. They were impressed by Jesus but were unwilling to commit fully to Jesus and be baptized.

Louis Martyn, a New Testament scholar, calls them crypto-Christians, or Christians in secret or in hiding. John believes that these crypto-Christians need to go beyond half belief to full confession. Scholars believe that the most of the discourse in today's text more likely comes from John than from the historical Jesus.

Nicodemus asks Jesus three questions. The first is more of a statement than a question: "Rabbi, we know that you have come from God a teacher; for no one is able to do these signs that you do unless God is with him." By using the first person plural, *we know*, Nicodemus claims to represent a group. He asks the question that the group is struggling with, "Does your authority comes from God?"

John would have seen this an insufficient understanding of Jesus. He was more than a rabbi and a teacher.

Jesus does not answer directly. He gives an enigmatic answer. "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless someone might be born [or begotten] from above, he is not able to behold the kingdom of God."

Today's text reflects the uncertainty surrounding Jesus. It includes at least ten words that have double meanings in Greek. The first one is the Greek adverb, ἄνωθεν. It can mean "from above" or "again".

There is no English word that means both "from above" and "again". Any English translation is going to lose this double meaning. It is going to imply that one meaning is more important than the other.

The King James Version selects the second meaning. It translates Jesus' response as, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." This is the source of the expression *born again*.

Jesus is challenging Nicodemus to think about what it means to be born ἄνωθεν. Nicodemus blows past the dilemma. He interprets ἄνωθεν to mean "again." He is confused and asks another question. "How is an old man able to be born again? Is he able to enter into the womb of his mother a second time and to be born?"

Nicodemus is hearing the word literally and Jesus is talking metaphorically. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he is using both meanings. "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless someone is born from water and spirit, he is not able to enter into the kingdom of God."

Born from water could be a reference to baptism, but it could also mean a normal physical birth. Nicodemus has just referred to his mother's womb, and we know that the water breaks in woman's womb when she gives birth. Born from the spirit refers to a spiritual birth. The Greek word πνεῦμα also has two meanings—it means both wind and spirit. The spirit is like the wind—it blows freely. No one knows

where the wind comes from or where it is going. It creates new possibilities that go beyond conventional wisdom.

Jesus may be saying that people need to be born both physically and spiritually. He is not denying the material and saying that the spiritual is all that matters. Jesus holds the physical and the spiritual together.

Nicodemus still doesn't understand what it means to be born from above. He asks, "How is it possible for these things to happen?"

Jesus rebukes Nicodemus. "You are the teacher of Israel and these things you do not know?" The text says, *the* teacher of Israel. Nicodemus may be the leading scribe on the Sanhedrin.

That may be getting in his way. The more education and experience people have, the more people tend to have a settled way of looking at things. The more dogmatic their theology is, the less they are willing to ask questions about their faith. They think they already know all the answers. Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist who wrote *The Righteous Mind*, says that people use reason to justify what they already know instead of opening themselves up to different perspectives. When they get new data, they stop listening as soon as they can connect it with what they already know. Nicodemus' education and experience is a stumbling block that keeps him from opening up fully to Jesus. He may be thinking that the most important thing is to be born as a son of Abraham.

Second Move: Exaltation Comes Through the Cross

Nicodemus drops out of the conversation, perhaps out of frustration. Jesus begins a long discourse. This is typical in the Gospel of John. Jesus talks in parables and in short, pithy sayings in the Synoptic Gospels, but in the Gospel of John, Jesus gives a lot of long speeches. Just because Jesus is talking in a long discourse doesn't mean that he is laying out the answers for us. He uses several words that have double meanings. He is challenging the audience in the same way as he challenged Nicodemus.

Jesus begins by expanding on what it means to be born *ἀνωθεν*. He refers to Numbers 21:4-9. The people are grumbling against Moses in the wilderness. God sends poisonous snakes among the people to punish them. The people realize they have sinned and Moses prays for them. God relents and tells Moses to lift a serpent up on a stick. Then the people who were bitten can look on it and be healed.

Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, in the same way it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up, in order that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life." The Greek word for *lifted up* has a double

meaning; it also means *exalted*. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is exalted when he is lifted up on the cross.

The glorification of Jesus is a three-step process in the Gospel of John: crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. The cross glorifies Jesus by revealing who he truly is. He descended from heaven as the Son of Man. Through his resurrection and ascension, he returns to heaven.

As the early followers of Christ tried to make sense of the cross, they conflated the traditional images of Messiah with Son of Man and Son of God.

Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man. The Son of Man is an eschatological title. He appears in the Book of Daniel and in 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, two books that were written in the intertestamental period. They describe the Son of Man as a supernatural being who comes down from heaven to judge all people and rule the world as a human being.

John is telling his community that the time for judgment has come. Jesus, like the Son of Man, comes from heaven. He is the light that comes into the world to save righteous people and bring judgment on the unrighteous.

No other books in the Old Testament or in Jewish literature describe the Son of Man as returning to heaven. John combines the title of Son of Man with another title, the Son of God, the only son of God, who pitched a tent and lived with humans for a little while, then returned to God.

Jesus comes down from heaven to reveal God's love for humanity. John 3:16 says this more elegantly: "For in this way God loved the *cosmos*, in that he gave the one and only son in order that everyone who believes in him might not *perish*, but might have *eternal life*."

John 3:16 is not as simple as it sounds. There are three words in this verse that have double meanings. *Cosmos* is nearly always translated as world, but its primary meaning is an adornment, a mark of beauty. It also means an orderly arrangement. The third meaning is the universe, the orderly universe, and that is what we think of today when we use the English word *cosmos*. The fourth meaning in Greek is humanity, the known inhabited world. The original Greek word suggests something bigger, the entire universe and the beautiful structure that God gives it. God doesn't just love humans; God loves the entire universe and the beauty of its structure.

Perish is the second word that has a double meaning. Perish is not just a synonym for die. It means to die prematurely. Think of perishable foods. It is life that is cut short. A second meaning is lost. It is saying something more than God does not want us to die a physical death. God does not want us to be lost, for our lives to be cut short.

The third word that has a double meaning is *eternal life*. In the Gospel of John, eternal life is another way of saying the kingdom of God. Jesus says in the first few verses of today's text that no one can behold the kingdom of God unless they are born from above. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born from above. Now he says that no one has eternal life unless they are born from above.

The Greek word for eternal is αἰώνιος. It is the root for the English word *eon*. It literally means of the age, as in an age of history. It can mean lasting for an entire age, a really long time, or it can emphasize the new age, the kingdom of God as a new age in history. In the Gospel of John, we enjoy eternal life right here and now when we are born from above.

God sends Jesus to the cosmos because God loves the cosmos. The last five verses of the discourse say that God does not want to judge the cosmos, God wants to save it. Save can also mean rescue or heal.

Jesus concludes, "This is the judgment. That light has come into the cosmos." Light was a symbol for God. In Dante's *Paradiso*, there are ten circles of heaven. The tenth circle, where God lives, is pure light. God is too beautiful to behold. The highest heaven is a blinding light. That light comes into the cosmos, but men love the darkness rather than the light. Most translations say their deeds are evil, but the Greek word for evil also means worthless, useless, slight, insignificant. John is not necessarily dividing the world into good and evil. He could be saying that most people lead trivial, insignificant lives instead of coming to the light and living with God.

Third Move: Embracing a High Christology

John has the highest Christology of any of the Gospels. It may reflect the crisis in his community. They thought they were living in the midst of the end times, and Jesus was the Son of Man who had come to judge humanity. Some of the oldest titles for God in the Old Testament are king, warrior and judge. It was a way of expressing the power of God. A king, a warrior and a judge were the most powerful men in their culture.

They saw Jesus as the revelation of God's love for humanity. God sent Jesus to draw people near to him in the end times. The cross shows the depths of God's love. It is the cross that makes new life possible. Believing that God gives Jesus new life through the cross opens up that same new life for those who believe. Jesus through his ascension returns to share in the life of God. Believers also share in the life of God, right here on earth.

We are born from above when we embrace the cross. The death of our old way of living makes new life possible.

Mainline Christians generally have a low Christology. We emphasize the teachings of Jesus and play down the miracles and the exalted titles. Evangelicals have a higher Christology. They place a greater emphasis on being born again. They accept the miracles and the exalted titles.

The Gospel of John can help lead mainline Christians to a deeper spirituality and to a deeper connection with evangelicals.

We can refrain from using the exalted titles as a club that we use to beat down people of different religions or no religion. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life for us as Christians. He is the only way to God for us. Yet we still hold out for an image of a big God, who is inclusive not exclusionary, who can reach out to different cultures and different religions in different ways.

We can also embrace being born again. I used to cringe when I heard the words *born again*. We associate *born again* with conversion experiences and altar calls. I have even heard altar calls at funerals. Born again is reduced to confessing that Jesus is your personal Lord and Savior. It's just you and Jesus; you have an intimate relationship.

Mainline Christians believe it places too much emphasis on the moment of conversion. They see faith as a lifelong process of drawing closer to God and closer to the kingdom.

Marcus Borg reminds us that the image of born again is at the heart of a contemporary spirituality. To deepen our connection with God, our lives must be transformed. Born again is the image the the Gospel of John uses this transformation.

Some people have dramatic born again experiences. Death is a dramatic way of expressing our old way of life, of being shaped by the values of the world instead of by the values of the kingdom. Baptism is a symbol of dying to our obsession with self consciousness and self interest.

But for most of us the process of deepening our relationship with God is more gradual. The Way may be a better metaphor for this process than born again. We can look back on our baptism and reflect on what steps we have taken to die to our false self and rise to new life in Christ.

Having a more exalted view of Christ can help us make the commitment that dramatically turns our life around. We don't have to embrace the oldest images of God as king, warrior and judge. But we can embrace the image of God as pitching a tent and living among us. Jesus is the Son of Man who came from God and the Son of God who returns to God and sits at the right hand of God. While he was among us,

Jesus showed us what God is like. His ministry of nonviolence, healing and reconciliation is still several centuries ahead of us. We have evolved glacially and he is still the model we point to. His dramatic life and witness can only come from God. He has returned to God and watches over us to help us as we progress on the Way. He comforts us when we fall short and encourages us to set our face like flint to transform our communities into the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

Clarifying our understanding of the identity of Jesus helps us clarify our own identities as disciples of Christ. Nicodemus saw Jesus only as a teacher and went away disappointed. Mainline Christians will also have a shallow spiritual life if they see Jesus only as a teacher.

Jesus is our polar star. We orient our lives to him. That is easier said than done. It takes a lifetime for most of us. Let us be on our Way.

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