

***Loving God, Changing Lives: Nicodemus***  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher  
March 8, 2020; John 3:1-17

I hate getting lost and before GPS was a thing, I was getting lost all the time. In fact, my first GPS was given to me as a going away gift from a church where it was notorious how lost I could get. They saw the gift as an outreach of all my future churches.

Now we have those directional systems on our phones, there is no excuse to not find our way. However, like any modern convenience there is also the down side. Sometimes that perky unflappable voice really bugs me! You know -- when you decide not to take the route that she thinks is correct and you head off passing that turn that your GPS thinks you should go? That cheery voice every 200 feet says, “Whenever possible, make a legal U-turn.”

I don’t know about you but in my head, I hear, “Turn around you idiot, get back on the tried and tested way!” It is so easy to personify a computer!

When you go against the mainstream and not follow that path that has been laid out for you, there is that nagging feeling of self-doubt. I may think this new way is better, but the voice is telling me, as soon as possible make that U-turn. Go back to the old way.

In these Sundays of Lent, we are looking at stories in the Bible that fill in the dots between Loving God and Changing lives. Today is the story of the Pharisee, Nicodemus who seeks to follow a new path only to be filled with self-doubt. . Tucked into this story is the best-known verse in the New Testament John 3:16. Listen to God’s word in John 3:1-17:

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see

the kingdom of God without being born from above.”<sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.<sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.<sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’<sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?<sup>11</sup> “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.<sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?<sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.<sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,<sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.<sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.<sup>17</sup> “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. This is the Word of the Lord; **Thanks be to God.**

We can assume that Nicodemus as a Pharisee was already loving God -- at least he devoted his life to following the laws of God. In this passage, Nicodemus is seeking out Jesus because he might have wanted to make a change in his life. Like so many of us, was he really prepared to be changed? In this exchange there was such a force telling him “Make a U-turn and go back to the place from where you came.” What Jesus is telling you is so different from what you have always known.

There are many good reasons not to like Nicodemus. He is a Pharisee. He is part of an outfit that resists the life-changing message offered by Jesus. He does not come to Jesus in broad daylight, but sneaks around at night so his friends and colleagues do not see him. When Jesus answers Nicodemus’ question, Nicodemus simply does not get it! When Jesus tells him that in order to see the

Kingdom of God, one must be born from above, or, as it can also be translated, born again. Poor Nicodemus can't comprehend. With all the study, thought, and contemplation behind him, Nicodemus cannot see the forest for the trees. He blusters, "How can anyone be born after living an entire life? It's a physical impossibility."

Slow down Nicodemus; do not worry about reentering the womb. Jesus means being born with water and the Spirit! We can almost shake our heads and laugh at the Pharisee's literal interpretive blunder. You would think that Jesus' response would clear up this issue once and for all. No, these verses have sparked countless debates among learned scholars and believers alike. What does it mean to be born again? We will certainly get a different answer asking that question to a group of mainline Presbyterians than we would get from someone from the Pentecostal faith. Then there is the entire question of baptism as it related to being born again, or born from above as our translation states. Are babies born again when we bring them forward to baptize them? And if you are born again and then you back slide and once again see the errors of your way are you born again, again? You see Nicodemus is not alone in getting caught up with one train of thought and as he ponders that, he misses the entire point!

He tries to seek a new way but the pull to go back to the traditional thought tugs at him, return to the path you know, that path that is sure! Make a U-turn, go back to where things are sure and not open with the possibilities that Jesus is presenting.

We are familiar with that voice that pulls us back to the way things were. We know that voice that urges us to look at things with only one kind of lens.

The times when I find myself facing a situation and seeing no way out of the dilemma, a think of the Crayola Company! I grew up with Crayola crayons, as did, I am sure, many of you. The Crayola Company has always had a remarkable range of crayon colors in their collection. Unless you have children or grandchildren at the Crayola age, many of you may not realize how much that company has adapted to the times and how they continue to expand their products. We are not only talking about simple crayons anymore. They have

magic markers, and not just the ordinary magic markers, there are dazzling color markers, fruity colors, tropical markers and markers that change colors. The list goes on. The one I think about in particular, when the urge is to stay with the ways I know rather than strike out into new territory, is the Crayola marker box called jumping colors! Jumping colors comes with special dark and florescent markers and a pair of 3-D glasses. You draw your picture with the darker colors in the background and fill in foreground with the florescent colors. When you are finished, you put on the special 3-D glasses. The picture that you have created changes before your eyes. The images jump toward you like they are coming right off the page. It is the same picture that you drew, however, with the help of the glasses, it transforms it into a three-dimensional picture and does not even seem like the one that you created.

I think about the jumping colors, and I realize that there are other ways to look at the situation. When we come to a dilemma at the church, or even differing opinions about the situation, and we think there is no other valid way of looking at it, think about the jumping colors and realize there are other perspectives that we may not see without help. Too often, we are stuck looking at something in one or two dimensions when there may be 3 or 4 or even more. Too often, we follow the same mistake that Nicodemus does, when he cannot see past the literal and hear the message that Jesus is offering.

Looking at things in a different light is something that I try to do in my role as a Transitional Pastor. I come into the church at a specific time in the church's history. There are things I have not experienced that many of you have in the history of the church. I hope I bring a way of looking at things without all the history attached. It is like we are going to the same place -- but there may be another road to take that is not the familiar one. A new pastor will also provide a different perspective and different way of approaching things that other pastors have tried. The challenge is for each of us, lifelong members and new members, pastors and future pastors, to look at our life in the church at different angles and to remember that one way of thinking one way of proceeding may not be the only way.

Like the jumping colors box, there is an aid that helps us to see things in a new light. We also have a pair of 3-D glasses. The 3-D glasses give the picture of what we do in this church depth and life. It is the same gift that Jesus offers Nicodemus, the Holy Spirit. Our challenges, dilemmas and problems are not solved by determination and intellect alone. We need, we rely, on God's grace through the Spirit to work with us and give us the depth to see things in a fresh way and to hear things anew. Even the oldest stories take on new life when we acknowledge God's presence, God's spirit, in our midst. We still have the responsibility to create the scene and make the picture. But when we think we are alone with solely our own resources to solve the problem, we are missing an entire dimension.

My oldest sister and her husband were pastors of a downtown church in Michigan. One of their on-going struggles as a church is their lack of parking. They needed a parking lot. Like any decent Presbyterian church, they formed a committee to see what it would take to get a parking lot. The first thing the committee did was to pray about their problem. How in the midst of buildings and limited space could they find a parking lot? Their task seemed impossible, so before they did anything else, they prayed. Then, they divided up and committee members contacted even the most remote possibilities to see if anyone in the downtown area around the church was willing to sell them land for a parking lot. You know what happened? A law firm that owned some land said yes, they were willing to sell. It was prime space, adjacent to the church, and they said yes! Now the church had to pay top dollar for it. They prayed for a parking lot, not a parking lot that would come cheap!

What was amazing was the town's reaction. The druggist said to them, "How in the world did you get that law firm to sell that land to you? My boss has been after them for years to sell it to him." The bank president was astounded that the law firm sold it without other bids. The bank really wanted the land. It got to the point that whenever someone from the community asked a church member how they managed to get that space, the member would smile and simply answer, "By prayer!"

It certainly is another way of looking at things. It is not the way we have become accustomed. Allowing the Spirit to play a real part in our decisions and interactions takes more than prayer at the beginning and ending of a church meeting. It means allowing our style and our way of doing and deciding things to be a bit unconventional. We also need to allow our ways to be questioned and to be open to look at a situation from another point of view. It means being open to God working in all that we do.

In the last two weeks, we asked each of you to consider who you would like to have serving on the Pastoral Nominating Committee. For many who may be contacted, the first answer would be “No way. I can’t fit that into my already crowded life.” That is one way to look at it. But consider that your answer is not just by you alone but consider your answer in partnership with the Spirit who moves us in ways that are not simple knee jerk reactions. The answer still may be no but you are making room in your life to allow the Holy Spirit to be part of your decision.

Jesus did not make it easy for Nicodemus; He did not take him off the hook. Jesus shows him another way of looking at things. Jesus concluded by blowing his mind even more by saying for God so loved the world, the world -- not just the Jews, not just those who follow the law -- but the world that God gave God’s son. This new path is not for a select few but for everyone, those who look and act like us and those who don’t.

As we move forward in the church’s life, and we dare to take an unfamiliar path, there will be that insistent voice in our heads that saying, turn around go back to the way you know even if it is not working as well as it used to. That voice is tempting. Here together we are equipped with a helper, Holy Spirit that it is leading us into uncharted grounds. In our own faith stories that fill in the dots between the loving God and Changing Lives, we experience the Spirit helping us to look at things in a new vibrant light. No U-turns today, but moving forward with the Spirit! Thanks be to God. Amen