

Nic at Night
The Monroe Congregational Church
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
January 23, 2022

John 3:1-17

The Rev. Dr. Alyce McKenzie, professor of preaching and worship at Perkins School of Theology, wrote about an interaction she had sitting in the waiting room of her local discount tire store¹

She had picked up one of those women's magazines and was reading something about supercharging her metabolism when someone sat down next to her. This made her uncomfortable, because she was in the middle of a row of empty seats. Suddenly, a pamphlet appeared in front of her face, blocking the information about metabolism.

The pamphlet was titled, "How to be born again." Sure enough, the inevitable question soon followed: "*Have you been born again?*" an earnest 40-something stranger wanted to know.

After an awkward moment of silence, the man said, "*Well, have you?*"

Dr. McKenzie took a deep breath and answered: "*I'm glad you asked that question. I've been reflecting on Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John chapter three and I don't think Jesus means 'born again' as if it were some emotional lightning strike that once it's over, we speak of our salvation in the past tense, like, that's done, now I have that checked off my to-do list. I think being born again calls for our participation, and I think it's a lifelong process.*"

Now, I doubt that any of you are planning to engage in this particular type of evangelism any time soon, but just in case, let me give you a tip... do not ask a seminary professor if she has been born again. Unless, of course, you have time to hear the answer.

She knew that if she said "yes," the guy would have known exactly how to respond. But if she had said "no," he also would have known exactly how to respond. But discussing salvation as a life-long process? The guy just took back his pamphlet and moved on.

¹ <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/03/nicodemuss-non-decision-alyce-mckenzie-03-14-2011>

A similar conversation almost happened to me a few years ago in Maine, when some nice people carrying Bibles knocked on my mother's front door asking the same question. "*Hang on*", she said "*My daughter the minister is here with us on vacation, let me have her come talk to you*". But by the time I reached the door, our visitors were back in their car, driving up the driveway.

It is interesting, really, that this phrase "born again" has become a way for the more evangelical members of our Christian family to talk about being saved, for accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, imagining it to be this dramatic conversion moment.

The phrase, of course, comes from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, who most certainly did not have an immediate conversion moment up there on the rooftop. Instead, if you follow his story through John's gospel lens Nicodemus shows up a couple of more times. Each time he does, he develops deeper thoughts about Jesus until he too becomes an ardent follower.

But not tonight.

I personally appreciate that, because my conversion was, and continues to be, a process. At my ecclesiastical council years ago (which is sort of a verbal final test to become an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ), one of the Fairfield East Association members asked me if I could tell him when I came to faith, when I accepted Jesus. It seemed like becoming a Christian was, in his mind, a life-altering one-time event that I should remember as if it were yesterday.

And perhaps he met Jesus that way, but I didn't.

I can't give a time or a place for my conversion. But I can talk about the North Madison Congregational Church where I was nurtured as a child, and how I kept myself busy playing under the pews while my parents were taking too long at coffee hour. I can talk about being a teenager at Silver Lake Conference Center, and what it was like to feel the Spirit of God while singing with friends at a campfire. I can talk about my call to ministry and some of the things I've felt God do through me. But I can't identify a date and time that I was "born again."

Neither could Nicodemus.

In his first encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus seems like he's testing the waters. He is not quite ready to be convinced, to sell all he has and follow. He comes to Jesus at night to ask questions, to see this miracle-worker for himself and form his own ideas about who he might be.

Perhaps he visits at night because he doesn't want his buddies to know what he is doing, but that might be reading too much into it. It's far more likely that he goes in the night because that's the time when most Pharisees did their study (they had other jobs during the day!). He might not even be sure going to see Jesus was the right thing to do, he seems curious, and he wants to know more.

The last words we hear from him in this scene are: "How can this be?" He is baffled and befuddled, like the earnest man in the tire shop asking Dr. McKenzie if she had been born again.

The next time we see Nicodemus is in chapter 7². The Pharisees are upset because the temple guards did not bring Jesus first to them. "*Good grief,*" they say, "*has this Jesus deceived you, too? All of us rulers know what's what, but there's some kind of curse on this mob that's listening to all of his nonsense!*"

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, is there. Eventually he speaks, "*Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?*" It's not a bold defense of Jesus, but it's certainly better than standing by saying nothing. It's enough to turn the sarcastic ire of the Pharisees away from the guards and toward Nicodemus: "*Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.*"

After this, Nicodemus appears again in the 19th chapter of John³, after Jesus has been crucified. Nicodemus brings about seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes and, along with Joseph of Arimathea, wraps Jesus' body for burial.

Is this the act of a man who has finally been "*born again*"? I don't know. But it surely is the act of a man who has come to love Jesus deeply.

Nicodemus' initial encounter with Jesus become his most identifying feature. In John 7, he is presented as "*Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier.*" And in John 19 he is identified as "*Nicodemus, the man who had earlier*

² John 7:50

³ John 19:39

visited Jesus at night.” Maybe it’s written that way so we, the reader, do not forget his gradual conversion, his changing mind and heart.

I know that some people do have those radical conversion stories; people who hear the voice of Jesus, leave their jobs and hit the road; criminals who get saved and give back all the money they stole; any number of Hollywood-worthy stories, google “born again Christian celebrities” and according to one website you’ll learn the top ten are Justin Bieber, Denzel Washington, Angela Bassett, Serena Williams, Mark Wahlberg, Candance-Cameron Bure, Nick Jonas, George Foreman, Jane Fonda and Alice Cooper⁴. And no, I don’t know what about them makes them the top ten!

The point I’m trying to make is this: there are also a lot of us Nicodemuses. Many of us who are curious, who want to ask questions and then need time to wonder about the answers. And there are even some of us who, after years of knowing Jesus, still aren’t sure exactly what we think about him.

And yet, he has still changed our lives. Slowly. Somehow. We become more and more defined by our encounters with him. More and more motivated by the love and compassion he teaches us.

And this, too, is a path of discipleship worth walking, and a story worth telling. And I wonder, on a day like today when we honor those who have been an active part of our congregation for 20 years or more, what some of those individual journeys have been like.

Perhaps there are new questions we might ask of each other. Not the simplistic “yes/no” questions like, “*Have you been born again?*” (which feels awkward to me). Instead, we might ask interesting, lovely questions like, “*Where have you met Jesus?*” “*What do you think of him so far?*” “*How is your life different because of him?*”

In the end, I suppose this approach won’t produce very good pamphlets. But I do think it will make for more faithful and honest lives. Amen.

⁴ <https://networthheightsalary.com/10-famous-christian-celebrities-who-are-devout-born-again/>