

John 3:1-17
NEW MATH

Life as I knew it as a nine-year-old ended when I was ten. I was in the 4th grade when my parents moved. It was not that far away, but it might as well have been a million miles. It was a new city, a new school, a new home, a new church and all new kids. I had to start all over again, an overwhelming task for a ten-year-old. But somehow life has gone on another five plus decades with new homes and schools and towns and churches and friends.

My heart first broke when I was 17. She was my first girlfriend. It was very innocent, but her parents being Catholic and mine Protestant decided it should end. And my heart was broken, I was sure never to be mended again. Finding another girlfriend when you are an incurably shy 17-year-old boy was just too much to consider. But now these years later I don't really remember what she looked like.

I went off to college and thought I would like to be an accountant, spending my life writing little numbers in little boxes, the perfect job, I thought, for someone incurably shy. But then I was introduced to a thing called calculus and decided maybe I would be a scientist until I opened a couple of college text books in biology and physics and came to believe that my best last hope was back home in Cleveland sweeping floors at Republic Steel.

A few years later when I finished seminary and got ordained I was just ecstatic about serving as a pastor and preaching on Sunday and leading a congregation until I got to know those to whom I pastored and preached and discovered it is sometimes a lot more fun than other times. This new calling to which I had been called was not what had been described to me by my professors. Being taught little of any practical value I had to simply launch out into an unknown new life, filled with trials for which I was simply unprepared.

And thus it has been from the beginning and is today. Something happens and I am sure it is the end, the last strike, the final chapter. I remember that painful time when we learned of seemingly insurmountable problems of infertility. That was followed by seemingly insurmountable problems of adoption. We had no idea that anything of any good could come from it. It all seemed so hopeless. But that crushing time of hopelessness was then followed by adopting our two sons.

I think back to when both of our sons began their freshmen year in college the same week. When I delivered the second son that week the walk back to my car was the longest walk of my life. Elise can tell you that for two weeks afterward I just keep breaking into tears. We would pass the pizza section of the grocery store and I would cry because we were always buying the boys pizza and now suddenly they are both gone. And in time Elise learned not to take me shopping. I was sure it was the last sad chapter but it turns out it was only a transition to the next. Then came the time both boys decided to move back home and we both cried uncontrollably.

We were well settled in a small town in secure positions, reasonably well compensated, in comfortable routines, about to ride things out we thought until time for the retirement party. We had no special need to go anywhere else or do anything else. It almost seemed that we did not have any special need to do anything but just stay within the comfortable familiar place. But something made us both uncomfortable, both things we understood and things we did not. When we announced that we were going to start again in a new church it was not something that made much sense to our friends. Yet three years ago we took a leap of faith to make the change.

There are those times we think we are just all set only to watch the set fall apart. We number our days and our bank accounts and think we have things all calculated out. But we know that somehow our math is not God's math and our ways are not God's ways. While we are counting it as the last chapter God is preparing for the next. That is what seemed to confuse Nicodemus.

Nicodemus, we are told, came at night though we are not told why. Dr. Robert Ozmont of First United Methodist Church in Atlanta received a call one night about 2:00 AM. He did not know the lady who called; she had found his number in the yellow pages. She had a problem. By any objective measure it was not an emergency. Certainly it could have waited until morning. Nevertheless, Dr. Ozmont tried to offer what advice he could.

Then he asked, "Ma'am, do you belong to a church in Atlanta?" "Yes," she replied. "I am a member of Calvary Presbyterian." "Why," asked Dr. Ozmont, "didn't you call your pastor about your problem?" "I thought about that," she said, "but my pastor works so hard that I just hated to bother him in the middle of the night." Sometimes people do not want to expose their

doubts and troubles to their own religious leader. It is safer to do what Nicodemus did, not going to the Temple priests or leaders but to this young man named Jesus.

His is not a bad confession of faith. Nicodemus said: “We know that you are a teacher come from God, because no one can do these miracles which you do, unless God is with him.” I am sure he meant it as a compliment but it just seemed to have irritated Jesus, maybe because he wants people to believe whether they see miracles or not. We are not supposed to wait until things get all better. To get to the moment of birth or the moment of rebirth there is the birth trauma. This is why new life often emerges at the very most painful times.

Perhaps one problem that some of us have with this passage is that it talks of something drastic that is not simply the common evolution of life but the change to a whole new life as we change from our mother’s womb emerging as a breathing screaming baby.

Our mother carried us. She labored to deliver us. She fed us, comforted us, and protected us before we could comprehend anything. We do not control our birth. We do not congratulate a new born for a successful delivery. The same is true for those who find a new spirit born in them. It is not something of our understanding or approval or initiative but something of God’s direction.

Birth is not a decision we make. We can make a decision to believe that Jesus is the son of God. We can make a decision to follow Jesus. We can decide to join the church. But we do not decide to be born and we do not decide to be born to a new life. This is something of God done by God and the best we can do is to look back and recognize what God has done and accept what Gods has done.

To Nicodemus’ confusion Jesus said, “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.” The wind blows where it will. The Spirit of God gives new birth wherever God wills. Or as Billy Graham said, “I do not see the wind, but I see the effects of the wind.”

It is to me troubling that so many people have used this passage to condemn others. Who has not had the experience of some friend, relative or stranger demanding to know, “Have you been born again? Is it a born again church?” If you don’t meet their standards of religious experience your faith does not count, as though we had a way to measure the faith of another. But whatever Jesus meant it certainly was not intended to be a source of pride or a means to make one follower feel superior to another.

The term “born again Christian” does not appear in the Bible. Someone just made it up. And remember that Jesus was talking with a man who was Jewish, not then a follower of him. Even the very term “born again Christian” is a redundancy. If you are born again, you are a Christian. If you are a Christian you are born again. There is no such thing as a non-born again Christian, nor is there any such thing as a born again non-Christian.

If those asking the question bothered to read the New Testament they would discover there are not two kinds of Christians: those claiming to be born again and those who do not. They will find those who are like Paul who get struck down blind in the middle of the road and those like Nicodemus who just seem to slowly work their way to commitment. All are accepted by God. It is not something we do but something we let God do in us. Jesus listed no special behavior or belief or experience. Just let God be God in your life.

Let me use an example from Spike Walker’s book *Coming Back Alive*. It tells the story of Coast Guard search and rescue of the crews of the fishing boat La Conte off of Sitka, Alaska, in 1998. When the crew of the boat realized that the boat was going down, the crew members put out a Mayday signal, put on their survival suits, and abandoned ship. The water was ice-cold, the wind was blowing 90 miles an hour, it was sleeting and snowing, dark and they were a hundred miles from land.

The Coast Guard launched three Search and Rescue helicopters, but it took them seven hours to reach the men in the water. Gusty winds made it nearly impossible to hover over the men in the water. Finally, one of the helicopters succeeded in rescuing the three of the men. One of the rescued men was Mike De-cap-ua, a tough, hard-living fisherman.

Mike said: “January 31, 1998, is my new birthday. That’s when I was reborn. The years since then are the best years I’ve ever had. I have a new

chance. Prior to the sinking, I was bitter. I walked around ticked off about life all the time, and my lot in it. He buried his old, angry self in the icy waters and was reborn to a new grateful life. He was talking about being reborn into a new life no longer dominated by anger. The prospect of death made him consider what was really important in life. He came away from that experience a new man, happier, more fulfilled. He says, "I was reborn."

It wasn't what Mike did that gave him new life. It was something that someone did for him. A helicopter crew risked their lives to save him. Mike only had to accept that saving event. He could have told his rescuers to go away. He could have told them not to bother him. He could have yelled at them for taking so long. But when the time came he reached out for the gift of life and received it gratefully.

Our rebirth is not something we do, but something that Christ does for us. We have to cooperate. We can tell Jesus to go away. We can tell Christians to leave us alone. The new life in Christ is accepted when we grab the rescue basket, let him pull us up to safety, and allow him to give us a new life.

And the conclusion of the story of Nicodemus and his new life is not in this chapter but at the end of the Gospel when Nicodemus risked his position as a leader in the temple and society by seeing that Jesus was given a proper burial. We don't know when the light dawned on him. We can't always remember when we moved from mourning a loss to accepting a new life and it is usually more of a process of awareness than an event.

One of the things I like about Nicodemus is that while he had position and power he was willing to acknowledge that there was something more he needed without even having a clue what that something else might be. He was willing to take a risk, at first a small one, coming to see Jesus at night then later a great one, providing for the proper burial of the man his fellow leaders had killed. He did not stop being Nicodemus. He was still a leader of the Jews, an elder, a man of prominence and means. He still kept all of the Laws of Moses that were so precious to him. At once everything was the same but everything changed.

In God's math we keep getting another chance. The bank might not give you one, maybe you cannot get another mile out of those old tires, and perhaps it seems you just cannot lose one more pound, but God has

different calculations. We have a mathematical sensibility that we use to add and subtract numbers. But God's math is different. We are more than the accumulation of years. Even as we add year after year God can take us back to zero, to start all over again. It is not a matter of math or science but the spirit of God. It is not something of our doing but something of God's doing we accept as a gift and begin again.

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The Federated Church of Hyannis

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