

“How Are These Things Possible?”

Rev. Andrew Harris · Trinity Sunday · May 30, 2021

Romans 8:12-17 (CEB Translation)

So then, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation, but it isn't an obligation to ourselves to live our lives on the basis of selfishness. If you live on the basis of selfishness, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the actions of the body, you will live. All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons and daughters. You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, “Abba, Father.” The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God's children. But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God's heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him.

John 3:1-17 (CEB Translation)

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.”

Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom.”

Nicodemus asked, “How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?”

Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't be surprised that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus said, “How are these things possible?”

“Jesus answered, “You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things? I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

Our story today begins with Nicodemus seeking out Jesus and meeting with him at night. He comes under the cover of darkness. His meeting with Jesus must be clandestine. Picture Nicodemus creeping down an ink black Jerusalem alleyway, lit only by the moon and stars, before ducking into the covert hiding place of Jesus and his followers. Nicodemus is a pharisee - a member of the priestly class with whom Jesus often quarrels. He too is a rabbi, a teacher, a Jewish scholar, although he and Jesus do not see eye to eye. He has come to speak with this great teacher, to ask him questions, to debate the issues, to try to understand the spiritual vision of this strange outsider who has built such a following.

The symbolism of Nicodemus coming at night is not an accident. To use the language of the author of the Gospel of John, he has not yet recognized that Jesus is the light come into the world. He is still shrouded in darkness, unable to see clearly who Jesus really is, unable to understand Jesus's message. He is seeking and questioning, unsure of where he is going, unaware that this path will lead both him and Jesus to the cross, although in different ways. In the deep, dark Jerusalem night, Nicodemus is lost.

"How are these things possible?" he asks. "How is it possible for an adult to be born?" For Nicodemus, Jesus's teachings make no sense. They do not compute with the way he sees and understands the world. It is obvious to him that grown adults cannot be born again. "They cannot enter their mother's womb a second time." It is unclear whether Nicodemus is chiding Jesus or if he's asking in earnest. Does he want to understand, or does he want to ridicule?

In Nicodemus's questions I hear echoes of similar questions that people often ask me. Sometimes people seek to understand but find that the gospel message does not compute with the way they see and understand the world. Sometimes people ask only rhetorically in an attempt to

point out the apparent absurdity in the Christian message, or, more accurately, their limited understanding of it.

“How can the earth be created in 6 days?” “What about the fossil record?” “How do you explain the fact that there’s no archaeological or geographical evidence of a great flood that wiped out the whole world.” These questions are born out of misunderstanding thanks almost entirely to the misrepresentation of Christianity in our popular culture. Many people seem to think, mistakenly, that Christianity is synonymous with Creationism and an aversion to scientific inquiry and exploration; with bigotry and intolerance toward any identity or lifestyle that falls outside of the heteronormative, cisgender, nuclear family; with the enforcement and proliferation of patriarchy, sexism, and traditional, complementary gender roles. Naturally, given Christianity’s association with these often-harmful ideologies, people will have some questions for us, like Nicodemus has for Jesus.

I choose to give Nicodemus the benefit of the doubt and assume that he is asking Jesus in earnest. After all, he has sought out this teacher under the cover of darkness, risking his social standing and reputation as a pharisee. He flatters Jesus, asserting that his great signs and miracles reveal that he comes from God. Most importantly, Jesus answers him with sincerity. Jesus treats him like a spiritual seeker and not, as we might call him today, a troll.

Although Nicodemus wants to understand Jesus’s message, it doesn’t make any sense to him. It does not cohere to the way he fundamentally understands reality. Like all of us, Nicodemus knows with certainty, that an adult human being cannot be born again from the mother’s womb. But as is so often the case with the Gospel of John, the entire passage hinges on a key double meaning. The word that Nicodemus hears as “born again” could also be understood

as “born from above”. Nicodemus is speaking and thinking, as Paul would say, in the world of the flesh. Jesus is speaking of the Spirit.

Here, once again, double meanings and questions of translation and interpretation come to the fore. In the Common English Bible translation of the passage from Romans that Bridget read for us this morning, the word traditionally translated as “flesh” is translated as “selfishness.” This change serves to highlight the point that flesh doesn’t simply mean skin, body, blood, and bones. When Paul speaks of the flesh, he’s talking about all that is earthly and human, he’s talking about the physical, material world. He’s talking about the world devoid of the Spirit, divorced from the transcendent. Like a sock puppet with no hand, like a toy with no batteries, it is missing that animating force that gives it life. Flesh is unable to transcend. It lives in the dirt and the dust and the muck and there it dies. This is perhaps the most plain and essential fact of earthly life: flesh dies.

The CEB’s choice to use the word selfishness imparts deeper meaning. For Paul, to live in the flesh is to live in selfishness. Flesh is the notion that we do things on our own, unaided by God. The flesh is not selfishness in the sense that it is always self-serving rather the flesh is selfishness in the sense that it originates from the self and not from God. Absent God’s Holy Spirit, it elevates and identifies the self as the ultimate creative agent of good and truth and justice in the world. To live according to the flesh is to act without God, to deceive ourselves into thinking that we can author lives of love and grace, truth and meaning on our own, absent of the Spirit of God.

This is the world of the flesh in which Nicodemus finds himself trapped and that surrounds us and tempts us today; a world that denies the transcendental reality of God’s grace. Nicodemus feels that familiar anxiety and alienation within this world which is why he seeks out

Jesus. In Jesus, we find the liberator who frees us from the bondage of the flesh and selfishness. In Jesus, we find the balm that heals the pain and suffering of this finite earthly plain. In Jesus, we receive an invitation to participate in God's life-giving Spirit which animates and inspires an otherwise dead and dying world. In Jesus, Nicodemus sees a glimpse of another world, a world beyond our wildest imaginations, a world that seems impossible, the world of the Spirit, the Kingdom.

The great preacher Fred Craddock says that this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus "opens up into a presentation on two widely divergent perspectives on life before God. The one seeks sufficient proofs, historical and logical, in order to arrive at faith which is safe, solid, and clearly the conclusion that one has reached on the basis of the evidence admitted into the case. The other insists that life in the Kingdom is given by God and is unachieved. Being from above, this life is uncontrolled and uncalculated, like the whence and whither of the wind. The shift from succeeding in religion [like Nicodemus, the pharisee] to having eternal life is as radical as being born anew."

Jesus tells him that like the wind, God's Spirit blows where it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. You cannot grab hold of it. You cannot contain it. For the most part, we cannot even predict it.

It turns out the whence and whither of the wind and the unpredictability of larger weather patterns is evident in the so-called butterfly effect: the premise that a small change in initial conditions can drastically change the long-term behavior of a meteorological system. The butterfly effect gets its name from Edward Lorenz, an MIT Mathematician and Meteorologist, who contended that it was possible for the flapping of a butterfly's wings to cause a tornado on the other side of the world. Lorenz was the father of chaos theory, the scientific principle that

some systems reside in chaos and are unpredictable. In this case, the weather. The greatest mathematicians in the world affirm first what Jesus said to Nicodemus: “The wind blows where it wishes. You hear its sound but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going.” And also, that God has the power to turn the flap of a butterfly’s wing into a tempest. What else can God do?

It’s interesting that the world of the flesh, the earthly world, the measurable material, physical world, is so chaotic and unpredictable. Nicodemus exhibits the sins of one born of the flesh, of selfishness, when he demands rational answers, evidence, and proof from an irrational world. Jesus, alternately, gives himself over to the will of the Spirit. “The wind blows where it wishes.”

To be born from above is to be one with the wind. Not to know it, but to feel it. Not to predict it, but to be moved by it. Not to understand it, but to be understood. Like Bob Dylan said, “The answer my friend is blowin in the wind.” But Bob Dylan also said, “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.” Nicodemus wants Jesus to be the weatherman. Jesus wants Nicodemus to reach out his hand and feel God’s Spirit moving like the wind.

Nicodemus appears a couple more times in the Gospel of John. The last we hear of him is after Jesus has died. Nicodemus brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing a hundred pounds and he helps to wrap Jesus’s body with the spices in linen cloths and he lays Jesus in the tomb. Nicodemus has clearly been moved and inspired by this miraculous prophet and teacher, but it seems he still has not transcended his fixation with the flesh. He is preoccupied with the preparation of Jesus’s body and his burial. He’s so close to getting it. He sees something special in Jesus and he’s trying so hard - and maybe that’s just it. It’s his eager striving that keeps him mired in the world of the flesh, of selfishness. Nicodemus hasn’t yet realized that it’s not

something you can do on your own. The Spirit of God is not earned or learned. It is a gift freely given, as bounteous and accessible as the wind.

On this Trinity Sunday, may we all reach out our hands and feel the Holy Spirit, which emanates from the eternal and transcendent God, and has been given to all people, at great cost, through the life, death, and resurrection of God's Son, our savior and redeemer, Jesus Christ. May we hear Jesus's message and take it to heart. The message is this: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

God loves the world so much that God has given us the gift of life everlasting through his Son Jesus. To be born from above is not simply to hear this message, but to give yourself up to this love that comes from God; not to understand it, but to trust in it; not to prove it, but to take it to heart. Have faith and let the Spirit guide you in all that you do. Amen.