

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector  
Calvary Episcopal Church  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
March 16, 2014  
The Second Sunday in Lent, Year A**

*John 3:1-17*

A number of years ago, a member of the Altar Guild in the church I served made a small but significant discovery. Before each service, the Altar Guild faithfully sets the table, polishes the brass, and prepares the linens, bread, and wine for worship. After the service, they clean it all and prepare for the next one. We couldn't do it without them. They usually have a special room, the sacristy, designated for that purpose.

For as long as anyone could remember there, the Altar Guild ministers had *only cold* water to work with from the tap. They heated water with a teakettle. If you have ever tried to get wine or lipstick stains out of a white, linen cloth you will know how much work it can be.

One day, an enterprising Altar Guild member decided to improve the situation. She purchased a small, hot water heater to make the ministry of the guild easier. This made everyone happy, including the rector. It was long overdue. When the sexton went to install the new hot water heater- *he* made a discovery. We *already* had one. It was there in the closet all the time. The problem, now quite obvious, was that it was not connected to the source. It wasn't turned on. When it *was* connected, it provided more than enough to do their work.

The Gospel story is about a man named Nicodemus. He had a problem of being connected to the source. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The 6,000 or so Pharisees spent their entire lives observing every detail of the religious Law. He had great security in a black and white faith. He was also a member of the Sanhedrin. They were the "supreme court" of 70 who had jurisdiction over every single Jew in the world. He was educated, wealthy, respected, belonged to all the right groups, was from the right family, and was religious. He had everything a person could need or want. In spite of all of this- something wasn't right.

So Nicodemus went to see Jesus under the cover of night. Why at night? He went then so no one else would see him go. He hoped the darkness would keep him from being exposed. From all outward appearances, he had it all together. Just a little bit of light would reveal the truth.

Nicodemus is an example of what many of us can do. We keep part of our life hidden or in the dark. Those parts we are ashamed of, embarrassed by, or cause too much pain. Each of us has something we want to keep hidden. A mistake. Something that happened to us. Something we

don't talk about or admit- even to ourselves. It doesn't matter if it is our fault or not. A skeleton in the closet is still a skeleton. It can still haunt us.

When the darker parts of life become the most insidious is when we pretend they aren't there - as if denying them will make it go away. It is then they can do the most damage. They eat away at our soul. Sometimes, by the grace of God, a person can confront their brokenness or need. That's what Nicodemus did. He acknowledged he was missing something even if he didn't know what it was. It took incredible humility to admit that he did not know it all and honesty to know something wasn't right. He needed to know God- to be reconnected to the source.

In the episode we heard today, Nicodemus approached Jesus and was told that he must be born from above--- born again. He misunderstood Jesus at first and was left silent. The scene is unresolved leaving Nicodemus to appear again two times later in the gospel.

When he returns, he is a changed man. Later, he spoke out to let Jesus be heard before the mob condemned him. He reappeared again with Joseph of Arimathea after our Lord's death. Joseph took the body and laid it in his own tomb. Nicodemus went with him and took expensive spices to anoint the body. This time he did not go secretly- but openly. It was a costly act, both financially and personally. He risked his reputation, but more importantly, he risked the security of certainty of his black and white faith. Apparently, somewhere along the way, he began to understand what it meant to be born from above or born again.

What *does* it mean to be born again? The phrase is often misunderstood. Nicodemus didn't get it at first. He took it literally. The phrase might confuse *us* for other reasons. Many of us hear the phrase "*born again*" in a particular way. We don't want to be one of those "born again types." We interpret that to mean saying the "sinners prayer" to "get saved" during an Altar Call. Don't miss what Jesus is trying to say by what we hear. Think *not* of being born again - think of it as being born *all over* again - reborn to life in Christ through the Spirit. It is a process that occurs over and over. To be born again is to be re-connected to God- the source of life.

When, exactly, was Nicodemus born again? When did he know he was loved by God? When he sought out Jesus in the first place? When he left the initial conversation? When he defended Jesus in front of the crowd? When he anointed Jesus' body? When he knew he didn't have it all together? Did he get baptized or say a prayer?

Christ offered Nicodemus *and us* a new chance at eternal life. To be born all over again into eternal life is *not* just about life after death although it includes that. What is offered is a free life out in the open- connected to- and full of the Spirit of God. And it is offered to everyone.

Jesus says to Nicodemus *and us*, I know that you hurt and doubt. Even those that seem to have it all together have their own crosses to bear. Their problems are just better hidden. You are invited to a new life in the midst of them. God already knows full well exactly who and what we are. The Lord knows all those things we keep under the cover of night. Christ came not to

condemn our failures and secrets but that we might be saved through him. God so loved the whole world that he gave his only Son so we might have a chance at life again.

I want to close with an Altar Call, but do it “Episcopal Style.” When you come to receive the Sacrament- silently offer to God all those burdens and skeletons you have been carrying around. What has caused you pain, guilt, shame, anger, embarrassment, or anxiety? What has separated you from full life and the love of Christ? Offer them to God at the Altar. Leave them there and find eternal life.

It doesn't matter *when or how* you are born all over again.

What matters to God, is that you are alive in Christ now.