

Community Church of Issaquah
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The Reality of Our Spiritual “uh-oh”

Rev. Vincent Lachina

One of my very favorite stories any minister has ever told came from John Buchanan, the former editor of Christian Century magazine and a wonderful preacher. He tells the story of one of his Sunday services and the baptism of a two-year-old boy. Now, in the Baptist church tradition, children are not baptized until they reach the age of accountability or understanding, so this story is all the more beautiful for me since it breaks that tradition. Holding the little boy and reading from the prayer book, he quoted the standard pronouncement, “You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever.” Without hesitation and quite unexpectedly, the child responded, “Uh oh.” Though comical, the response is actually appropriate. I can hear the giggles and see the smiles it invoked.

Undoubtedly, one of the most familiar and likely most memorized verses of the Bible is the John 3:16 passage that was read this morning. I would be willing to bet that if I asked, all of you could recite it with confidence. The story behind the verse might escape us, though. Let me fill you in on some details about the fascinating conversation that led Jesus to utter such a profound statement. It’s a beautiful interaction between Jesus and a fellow rabbi, or in the Hebrew language, teacher.

Life in the times of Jesus was complicated and made even more complicated by Jesus’ appearance on the scene. Conflicts between the people of Israel and their Roman occupiers made daily life difficult at times. Adding to this conflict was the balancing act Jewish leaders and rabbis were confronted with, simply to be faithful to their beliefs and at

the same time ensure that the balance of power between Rome and Jerusalem was kept intact. Imagine then how curious some of these Jewish leaders must have been when Jesus appeared on the scene claiming to be the Messiah, the one who had been prophesied and for whom Israel was waiting.

Out of that curiosity, a Pharisee and one of the prominent rabbis, a man named Nicodemus, decided to see for himself who this Jesus person was and find out what his message was. Perhaps because he did not want to be seen taking on such a mission, Nicodemus went in the darkness of night. The Scripture passage we read this morning shares some details about that interaction between two rabbis or these two teachers from very different perspectives. Often, we forget that indeed Jesus was considered a rabbi or teacher by those who followed him and believed his message. But that is how Nicodemus begins the conversation. It went like this: “Now, Jesus, everyone knows that you are a teacher who comes from God, because if you weren’t, you could not do the things we’ve seen and heard about.”

What exactly were the things that folks had seen or heard about concerning Jesus? This interaction with Nicodemus comes in this accounting after Jesus had cleansed the temple and had performed signs during the Passover feast mentioned earlier in John’s gospel.

And Jesus replied, “Yes, that’s right. You can’t even see the kingdom of God unless you are born again.” Confused at this whole idea, Nicodemus asks, “And just how can you be born again if you’re already old because you sure can’t crawl back into your mother’s belly.” Attempting to answer this puzzling question, Jesus explains that re-birth comes from the Spirit, not a physical re-birth. Then follows the question we all ask, “How can these things be?” The surprise that Jesus

expresses is priceless. “Aren’t you supposed to be a teacher of Israel? How could you not understand about a spiritual re-birth?”

Even though the conversation continued with more questions and answers, we would miss the point of the passage if we did not focus on Nicodemus’ real crisis or conflict and that is, the person of Jesus. How could it be that Jesus, there in the flesh, was sent by God? And even more confusing, how could it be that the reason Jesus was present was because God loved the world. “Look around!” Nicodemus might say. “Do you see what this world is like? War, violence, hatred, sin, rebellion. That’s the world you’re saying God loves. Hard to believe.”

Hard to believe perhaps, but true. God loved the world so much that it was necessary to send Jesus in the flesh to offer a passage way to eternal life. And just as Jesus’ message to Nicodemus was that he must be born again in spirit if he wanted to belong to God, the same message applies to our world and to us. That very precept evokes in many of us as our spiritual “uh oh.” The underlying truth of this passage in John’s gospel is clear: we are in trouble and Jesus has come to save us.

We don’t know what Nicodemus chose to do or believe after his nocturnal visit with Jesus. The details are not spelled out for us. He is mentioned only in the gospel of John and none other, and apart from his night visit, he appears only twice more. Once when he comes to the defense of Jesus when he tells his colleagues to hear and investigate before making a judgement on Jesus and is told that no prophet could come from Galilee. The final time he is mentioned when he comes with the appropriate embalming spices to assist Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial. It’s hard to imagine the internal conflict that Nicodemus must have faced - a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and a member of the Sanhedrin who advocated for the crucifixion

of Jesus. Perhaps it's similar to our own struggles of following the teachings of God's son.

How do we come to grips with the spiritual truth that God loves us and loved our world enough to give us Jesus? What does it mean to belong to Jesus Christ forever? Like the world of Nicodemus, in our world there is so much violence, so much hatred, such wide gaps of division that it's hard to believe that God could love this terrible mess. Yet, it was that very love for Nicodemus' world and now for our world that led God to sacrifice Jesus. It was not incidental that God only did this one time, only one son of God. One messenger of eternal life. One place of belonging. Just as the story of the two-year-old's response to the affirmation "you belong to Jesus Christ forever" was an unexpected "uh oh," you and I might say the same thing. God so loved us? "uh oh."

The consequence of this accepting a spiritual re-birth is that it requires a re-birth in our behavior and our truly accepting and living out the teachings of Jesus. For me, that's my own personal spiritual "uh oh." Am I really living as a re-born child of God? Certainly, I try, and even with my failures, I sometimes must push to believe that God loved me – ME – so much that the sacrifice of an only child was not too great to give for my own eternal life. I wonder. Do you suppose this was Nicodemus' struggle when he heard the words, "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whoever believe in him should not perish but have eternal life"? I wonder.

There is some evidence of this transformation for Nicodemus found in the 19th Chapter of John. It reads: "Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night." Perhaps Nicodemus had

encountered his own “uh-oh” and it had changed his life and belief in Jesus the Messiah. Now what about us? When did we have our “uh oh” moment with becoming the child of God and belonging to Jesus Christ forever?