

“When we are baptized in Christ Jesus, we are baptized into his death. We are buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Whenever I preside at a funeral I go to the font and remind the people that while we are gathered because a person has died to this earthly life the truth is the baptized have already experienced death. Their first death occurred at baptism. When the person was baptized the old sinful person was drowned and when he or she came up from the water there was a resurrection to new life; made new in Christ Jesus forgiven and free to live life unafraid of death. Rebirth, new life and the best part the person does nothing to have this new birth. It is freely given; coming to us by the Spirit.

For several years I wrote to man who is living the rest of his life in prison for a crime committed in during a mental break. I never met him but I knew his parents and as you can imagine as their only son this was devastating. I started writing him for them but the truth is what I learned from him was far greater than the time it took me to write to him.

In prison he started studying scripture and living his baptism promise. Our letters became very theological. In one letter I wrote about teaching the catechism in confirmation and about Martin Luther. His return letter told me how much he remembered about confirmation... which was pretty much nothing. He didn't realize there was a catechism. Now you can't just send someone a book in prison but you can do it through a book company. I got on Amazon and ordered him Luthers large catechism with other confessions of Luther.

Several weeks later I received a letter. There had been a picture of Luther on the book and as Mike said “that old monk stared down at me enough I finally took it off the shelf and read it.” Then, he said, I had been ministering to this other inmate and telling him about baptism. He had been very reluctant. But in the catechism I had read that the amount of water doesn't matter that it is the water with the word. I realized the other inmate was afraid of baptism because he was afraid of drowning. He was afraid he would die in baptism... so we had a talk. I explained Yes he would die; he would die to sin in forgiveness and that while baptism promises an eternal life with Jesus at the earthly death baptism promises a new life, a forgiven life, a rebirth now of living free from sin now. Then Mike wrote... you know what this guy wanted baptized right then and

there and I did. I baptized him with a little water and God's Word. Thanks for sending me the old monk.

Nicodemus, like the inmate, had a difficult time understanding. The story we hear this morning is only in the gospel of John. We are going to hear three more stories from John in the next few weeks. I am going to pause here and recommend you take the time, at home, to read some from John. John was no ordinary writer. John's writings leave a lot left to the imagination. John writes like an artist, painting on canvas. An artist paints in layers. First layer is a base; the background, and then they just keep adding, until, a beautiful picture emerges. With John writing in the same way, when you read or hear a story, think about how you look at a piece of art; each time seeing something new. In the layers of John you might hear something differently.

With these layers in mind let's return to the story of this Pharisee, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Ask yourself what Nicodemus wants and why he is there. Is there a reason he comes at night? Is he hiding or is John illustrating how Nicodemus is in the dark about who Jesus is; and Jesus who is the light will dawn upon Nicodemus?

And oh that is what Jesus does; Jesus enlightens this supposedly very intelligent Pharisee, but it happens in a strangest way. You can't help but feel a little bad for Nicodemus. Hear this story again: Nicodemus comes to Jesus, at night, and gives Jesus a compliment. He tells Jesus that the leaders of the Temple all know Jesus must be a teacher sent from God because otherwise Jesus would not be able to do the things he does. Now in the layers you might decide Nicodemus is using flattery to try and trap Jesus; or he might be coming at night in order to keep his whereabouts a secret from fellow Pharisees because he doesn't want them to know he actually thinks Jesus is from God. Again, John allows you to decide.

So Nicodemus offers this compliment but that's it. The compliment is all he gets said before Jesus responds and this is where things take a turn. Jesus' response has nothing to do with the compliment. In today's world we would say Jesus is listening to respond rather than listening to understand. Jesus even seems to interrupt Nicodemus and says "You know what Nicodemus... the truth is no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again from above."

Umm...okay... where did that come from? If I were Nicodemus I would have been somewhat confused... Did Jesus even hear the compliment? Was it like the breakfast table in so many homes where everyone is staring at their phones when one member makes a life-altering statement, like "I was accepted into

Stanford. I am going to medical school!" and the rest of the family nods, Uh-uh, so what should we have for supper tonight?"

Jesus literally destroys the conversation Nicodemus thought he was going to have and attempts to bring new life to Nicodemus by telling Nicodemus how he can have this new life. Apparently the leap was too big for Nicodemus to make in the moment. So he states the obvious, nonsensical version of being born again... returning to the mother's womb, as an adult, and re-emerging from the birth canal. I am sure every mom would have something to say about this; one time per kid is enough. Nicodemus is still in the dark, he doesn't have a clue what Jesus is teaching. But we can't be too hard on Nicodemus, there are still people today who don't fully grasp what Jesus is teaching. They hear an incorrect translation that one must be "born again" and think there is something that has to be done to enter the kingdom of God.

Have you ever met a "born again" Christian; the one that "found Jesus." First of all Jesus is never lost;" Jesus is with us; not playing hiding go seek; waiting for us to find Him. Remember the end of Matthew "and lo I am with you always, until the end of time.

Secondly, those who hear this scripture believe like, Nicodemus, that a person needs to do something to be loved by God. A person needs to make a choice for Christ. But one big concept they fail to understand is that by making this choice a person is also saying he or she gets to decide when, where and how God is going to operate in their lives. It is an interpretation of this scripture that Jesus destroys by shedding more light. The importance of hearing the entire story and not just a snippet.

Again, Jesus doesn't listen to understand; Jesus enlightens. "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." New life comes from above and the power and action of God is "for you" and from above. It is not your choosing. The Spirit comes like the wind that certainly in central Montana we know we cannot control, and the water is where we are born a new.

Lutherans are definitely not "born again Christians." We rely on this blowing spirit... the one that lands where it will and calls us to the baptism waters. The Spirit pours into us without anything being done by us; the Spirit washes away the stench of death, sin, and raises us to new life. This new life IS the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God NOW and forever. The kingdom of God, eternal life, is not something we wait our entire lives for; the kingdom of God comes to us. John 17 tells us that eternal life is not at earthly death; eternal life is knowing God; eternal life is knowing the one true God and the Son God sent.

In this one conversation with Nicodemus Jesus destroys death and its power.

Why would God do this? Why does God destroy death and all of its power over us?

Because God so fiercely and mightily loves the world that God sent his son into the world to destroy death so that all the world might have life.

As baptized children of God we are a people reborn to God's kingdom, living a new life. In this new life, fed and forgiven, we have the ability to live a life of love, truth, freedom and abundance in the midst of a world that , conflict, hate and violence. God offers us the freedom to be different from the world; opening the door to something new.

And yes, sometimes different, makes us nervous. The world so often tells us there is only one way to be right; one way to think; one way to worship. However, Jesus tells us the one way is God's love, the one way is the truth in Jesus and all else can be made new and the newness makes way for life.

My question then is how do we respond? Do we respond like Nicodemus and live afraid... afraid of the new... afraid of what God is doing in the world that might seem new and different? Or do we open ourselves discovering something new and marvelous everyday that tells who God is. Our baptism is not about death; it is about the life and living it to the fullest.