

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d’Alene
Second Sunday of Lent
March 1, 2026
9:30 AM

Text: John 3:1-17

Theme: Bless the Lives We Actually Have: Blessed Are the Curious

[prayer]

After last Sunday’s sermon on perfectionism, I had a moment of insight. As I stood in line at the beverage counter and chatted with some of you about being a “recovering perfectionist,” I remarked: “I think I understand the Pharisees a little better. They also struggled with perfectionism.” The Pharisees are an often misunderstood and villainized sect in Second Temple Judaism who emphasized personal piety and a strict adherence to Jewish law. They believed in democratizing holiness – not just the priests but *every Jew* should keep themselves ritually pure in daily life. In the law the Pharisees saw the path to salvation. *Do these things, follow these steps, and you will be saved.*

Western Christianity, especially Protestantism, has always been very intellectual; we put a lot of emphasis on understanding God with our minds and using reason to discern God’s nature. In general, our tradition has a low tolerance for mystery. Like the Pharisees, we like our rules and our certainty. *Believe the right things, follow these steps, and you will be saved.*

But what is lost when we lose the ability to embrace mystery? What is lost when we stifle the questions that do not have easy answers?

In our gospel lesson, a Pharisee named Nicodemus makes a clandestine visit to Jesus in the dead of night. The time that Nicodemus chooses to visit is significant. While Nicodemus’s visit is one of the first acts of discipleship in John’s Gospel, Nicodemus does not have enough faith yet to visit Jesus in broad daylight, to claim his curiosity in front of his friends and peers. Nicodemus thinks he knows who Jesus is; he calls Jesus “a teacher who has come from God” (v. 2 CEB). Ironically, he has just confessed Jesus as the Christ without knowing it.

Nicodemus's acknowledgement is based on reports of the signs and wonders Jesus has been performing. But Jesus is clear that if we want to follow him our belief cannot depend on signs and wonders. Our belief cannot depend on physical evidence. Our belief cannot even depend on what we think we know about God.

Faith is belief that persists despite the gaps in our knowledge. Nicodemus thinks he knows who Jesus is and therefore understands why he has come. But Jesus is about to show Nicodemus how little he does know and challenge what Nicodemus thinks it means to be a person of faith.

“I assure you, unless someone is born *anōthen*, it's not possible to see God's kingdom.” (v. 3). *Anōthen* has a double meaning: It means ‘from above’ as well as ‘anew’ or ‘again.’ Nicodemus misunderstands Jesus and thinks Jesus means we must literally be born again from our mothers. His strict worldview is keeping him from grasping Jesus's meaning, but Jesus is a patient teacher. “No one can enter the kingdom of God,” he says, “without being born of water and Spirit [capital ‘S’]. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit [capital ‘S’] is spirit [lowercase ‘s’]...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” (vv. 5-6, 8 NRSVUE).

Jesus is making yet another play on words. When he says we are born of water, he is referring to the waters of our mothers' wombs – the flesh born from flesh. As Christians, we also hear an allusion to the waters of baptism, where we die to our old life and are raised to new life in Jesus. But baptism is not just a ritual of water. It is also a ritual of the Spirit. Just as Jesus received the Holy Spirit at his baptism, marking him as God's beloved Son, we too receive the gift of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands, marking us as God's beloved children.

So, to be born again – born *anōthen* – is to receive the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is like the wind (another play on words – the Greek word for ‘spirit,’ *pneuma*, also means ‘breath’ or ‘wind’). She blows where she chooses. She is unpredictable. She is not confined by the limitations of human knowledge and human institutions. In her mission to grow and sanctify us as disciples, the Holy Spirit will stretch our faith beyond the comfortable bounds of what we think we know about God. While our creeds and profession of faith serve an important function in our spiritual lives, these are not the things that allow us to have faith

like the wind. Those who are born of the Spirit live lives attuned to the movement of the Spirit. And by following the Spirit where she leads, well beyond the limits of our spiritual imaginations, we can begin to fully grasp what the kingdom of God is about: Not escaping this world for the next but partnering with God in His great work of redemption in the here and now.

For “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life” (v. 16 CEB). Many of us were taught this as the summary of the Gospel. We interpret belief – *salvation* – as intellectual assent. But in John’s Gospel, being born again and believing in Jesus are not primarily about what we do with our minds but what we do with our hearts and our lives. Jesus teaches that “This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil. All who do wicked things hate the light and don’t come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God” (John 3:19-21). What we believe about who Jesus is must be borne out by our actions. And as our actions align with the will of God for us, we experience eternal life.

Eternal life is not just a future state of being; it is a present-tense reality. We experience eternal life by *knowing* the Father *through* the Son *in* the power of the Holy Spirit. Because God is eternal, we experience eternity every time we experience God’s presence. Eternal life is not merely unending life, but life that is lived in the unending presence of God. This new form of life starts in the present and culminates in the Resurrection when we will live permanently in God’s presence.

As we grow in our knowledge and love of God, we experience that taste of eternity more consistently. This is because we learn how to view the world from God’s perspective instead of our own. In this way we are indeed “born again” because we begin to understand and imitate the full character of God that has been revealed to us in Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we look upon Jesus and we begin to understand who God is and what God has done for us.

There is nothing faulty with Nicodemus’s faith. It’s just too small. It’s incomplete. Jesus invites Nicodemus to reconsider his relationship with God, not as a

relationship primarily defined by rules but a relationship defined by God's dynamic, transforming Spirit.

In chapter nineteen Nicodemus reappears, this time at Jesus's tomb alongside Joseph of Arimathea, another clandestine disciple. It takes Nicodemus the entirety of John's Gospel to stop hovering on the margins of discipleship, to stop following Jesus from afar and move out of the shadows and into the light. He didn't find himself standing at that tomb, in direct opposition to his fellow Pharisees, because he perfectly followed the rules. He found himself there because he began to ask the right questions. Those questions started with one in particular: "How can it be?" "How is this possible?" (v.4). Nicodemus's curiosity overrode his sense of order and made way for the Spirit of God to lead him in the way, the truth, and the life everlasting.

God blesses the curious. Jesus's interaction with Nicodemus is proof for any among us who have been taught that our spiritual questions betray a lack of faith. They do not. Our questions are instead a sign that we are ready to learn and experience something new. They are the fertile ground for spiritual transformation, for the new and eternal life that only Christ can give. We can admit uncertainty and still have faith in the absurd love that God has shown us on the cross.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas says, "The ability to live well is the ability to live without explanation."¹ I think this can be restated as "The ability to live well is the ability to receive and trust in God's guiding Spirit." Our questions can coexist with our faith. Because our faith is not in a set of beliefs; our faith is in a Person. We are not saved through our knowledge of God, our grasp of doctrine and Scripture, or our stubborn rejection of doubt and the unknowable. We are saved through the belief that a relationship with Jesus makes a difference for us and for the whole world. Eternal life is ours because we have a relationship with God in heaven through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This relationship is dynamic. It is meant to reshape us and redefine us, change us and challenge us, stretch the boundaries of our knowing so we can begin to comprehend the boundless love of God. This is what it means to be born of the Spirit – because it is the Spirit that helps us see and understand the heart of God

¹ <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/more-life-fewer-explanations-2/>

that is revealed in Jesus. The Spirit empowers our comprehension, leading us nearer and nearer to God's heart – a heart so bent on love it descended from heaven to earth so we can experience eternal life.

Blessed are the curious...for they will be truly born again.

Amen.