

Today's devotion was written by Rev. Becki Verbridge, Interim Pastor at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Elyria.

“For God so loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its savior.” John 3:16-17 GNT

It's pretty easy to get questions answered these days. All you have to do is type your question into the web browser on your laptop or mobile device to be directed to sites where you can find the answer. For those who prefer an audible answer, you can ask your personal home assistant – like Apple's "Siri," or Amazon's "Alexa" or Google's "Echo" – which will literally tell you the answer to you. What a world!

It wasn't so easy when I was growing up. When we wanted to know something we had to go to the library and look up the topic we wanted to know more about in the card catalog which would lead us to books where we could find the answers. Those old fashioned card catalogs helped those of us growing up in the 60s and 70s solve significant life mysteries which our parents weren't quite ready for us to understand yet.

So sometimes we went about using the card catalog with a lot of stealth. A group of us would gather in the library at the end of lunch or during study hall. Someone at the table would be recruited. She would get up from the table and stroll over to the card catalog pretending to look for one thing while really looking for what we all wanted: a book that would explain the facts of life to us. Once we found it in the stacks, we would usually attempt to hide it so the library staff wouldn't notice. I cannot tell you why we went through so much trouble to be secretive about it. I guess it's because – at the time - we felt there was some kind of risk involved.

The back story to today's lectionary verses involves a Pharisee named Nicodemus who had some questions. And, like those of us who gathered in the junior high school library hoping our "research" would go unnoticed, Nicodemus hoped his pursuit of answers would go unnoticed as well.

Nicodemus had become aware of Jesus, the young rabbi who had emerged on the religious scene, turning water into wine and running money changers out of the temple. Nicodemus was curious so he watched and listened from a distance. He knew his colleagues expected him to follow their lead in keeping their distance from Jesus so as not to be mistakenly associated with him in any way, but Nicodemus just had too many questions. And, unlike us, he didn't have an easy way to get his questions answered. Although it was a dangerous proposition that could be ruinous to his reputation, Nicodemus decided he needed to talk to Jesus himself. So he devised a plan to meet Jesus after dark, when everyone else had retired for the night.

Listen again to the story in John 3:1-7: One night [Nicodemus] went to Jesus and said to him, *“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles you are doing unless God were with him.”*

Jesus answered, *“I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again.”*

“How can a grown man be born again?” Nicodemus asked. *“He certainly cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time!”*

"I am telling you the truth," replied Jesus, "that no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. A person is born physically of human parents, but is born spiritually of the Spirit. Do not be surprised because I tell you that you must all be born again."

And that's pretty much where this particular encounter ends. Nicodemus asks his questions and Jesus answers, but not directly. Jesus rarely answered questions directly. So, rather than the "Aha!" moment Nicodemus was hoping for, he most likely went home with more questions than when he started.

That is why I tend groan when I see welling-meaning but (in my opinion) misguided football fans holding up signs at games with John 3:16 written on them: **"For God so loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life."** This verse has become emblematic of a faith that is simple and easy. However, when you read the entire passage and understand the context, you come to understand there is nothing about faith that is simple or easy.

The kind of change Jesus was referring to when he talked about being "born again" was more than giving up cussing or going to church. The kind of change Jesus is talking about when he uses the expression "born again" is much deeper than that. It involves a change of perspective, seeing life through the lens of God's love, forgiveness, and grace.

Over the course of my life and ministry, I have met any number of people who talked about being "born again." Most of them were referring to a particular moment when all of a sudden they believed God was real and everything made sense. For them it was a life-changing moment. Some even said they no longer questioned anything.

That's not how it is for most of us, though. Sure, we have moments when God's love feels a little more real and things seem a little clearer. Most of us, however, struggle to be people of faith, questioning and doubting from time to time until we reach a new place in our journey. You see, faith is a process, not an event. And being "born again" is not something that happens to us just once, but over and over again as we grow in our faith, coming to see the world more and more like God sees it.

Martin Luther had a custom - especially during times of question, struggle and doubt - of walking into the church and putting his hand into the water in the baptismal font. He would then touch the water to his forehead and say "I am baptized." In other words, he was reminding himself that despite his questions, struggles, and doubts, he was being reborn – made new - by the grace of God, each and every day.

I like the idea that we are continuously being born again. That means that we are able to go back to Jesus, time and time again, to ask the questions that keep us up at night.

Nicodemus' faith journey was not easy or simple. It cannot be condensed into one sentence on a poster board or a few words on a bumper sticker. None of ours can be either, because there is much more to it than that!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJq3bhdgQoc&list=RDZJq3bhdgQoc&index=3>