

In my mind, there isn't a more tender, more poignant story in all of scripture than this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. And sadly, from this story, comes one of the most worn out, divisive and confusing questions the conservatives among us like to use as a weapon in an arsenal of judgment: “have you been born again?” Has anyone ever been accosted by that question? I sure have.

Let's put that question back into context where it belongs. You know, we're having the most amazing time in our Spirituality of Wine program. This program is as much about examining our spiritual lives as it is about anything else. We spent a little time talking about this story last Friday. We discovered when we take passages from the bible out of their context and use them to advance our own theological agenda the meaning is lost, full appreciation for the worth of the story is lost. On Friday we discovered that when you take wine out of its context, tasting it from a glass that is inappropriate for the variety of wine, full appreciation is lost. Taking anything out of context runs the risk of sabotaging full meaning and appreciation – for anything. The parallels were remarkable. I'm thinking the Spirituality of Wine should be core curriculum here at Lynn Valley United Church.

So what does that mean with this tender conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus? To begin, we need to understand Nicodemus. We need to understand his position, his life's journey, his greatest desire. Nicodemus has spent his life helping his people come to a relationship with the God of his ancestors. Nicodemus is loved, he is cherished by his people, he is a great pastor, a great theologian, a great liturgist. We know this in the words “there was Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.”

At their inception, Pharisees were a good thing. It was the practice of every good Jew to leave his home and make the journey to the temple in Jerusalem at least once a year, to pay alms, to worship, to hear from the rabbis and priests the wisdom of the law and the prophets and to offer sacrifices to God. The pharisaic order was formed to bring temple worship to local communities, so that faithful Jews could participate in regular, weekly Sabbath worship. Pharisees were responsible for helping people discover a regular spiritual practice in local synagogues. The problem was that they became rigid in their understanding of what that worship should be like. There was only one way to worship; one way to study the Torah, one way to pray, and over time, they became rigid and stern.

Nicodemus was one of them. In the hierarchy of Pharisees, he ranked pretty high. Protocols came with his rank. He had to follow the rules. But according to the story, he hears of this Jesus, and all the miraculous things Jesus has been doing, and he comes to Jesus at night. This is not insignificant friends. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, because to be seen with this religious upstart in the daytime would legitimize Jesus, and break the protocols to which Nicodemus was bound.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, he wants to know how Jesus knows what he knows and can do what he does? If I use the names Josh Groban and Placido Domingo do you know what I'm talking about? If I use the names Tiger Woods and Jack Niclaus do you know what I'm talking about? If I use the names Wayne Gretsky and Rocket Richard, do you know who I mean? This story is like Placido Domingo coming to Josh Groban, in the dressing room of a concert 8 years ago, wondering how on earth he could sing like he does at the age of 22.

Nicodemus gives Jesus the nod, admires him for his work, asserts that all of it is the work of God's Spirit. But Jesus actually returns the compliment; Nicodemus, you can only see that these things are from God if you have been born of the spirit. John puts it this way Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." I don't believe Nicodemus saw this coming, he didn't see in himself what Jesus sees in him. Jesus has to be saying to Nicodemus...you are born in the Spirit or you wouldn't see what you see.

But Nicodemus is stymied. You can almost hear him chuckle when he says ""How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" And in this moment, Jesus gives Nicodemus and us the point of his ministry. Give yourself to the God's Spirit, it blows where it will. Allow yourself to be re-born in Spirit. Come alive. That's how I read these words. Astonished, Nicodemus says "how can this be?" And Jesus responds, 'why, you're a teacher of Israel, you bring the word of God to the people and you don't know these things in your bones.' There is no condemnation on Jesus' part here. He has nothing but deep compassion. I hear Jesus encourage us to be open to the Spirit that blows where it will.

Do you hear now where the question "have you been born again?" comes from. I wonder if it changes for you, I wonder if you feel less skewered and more invited.

So what does it mean to be born in the Spirit? I think the answer comes again from something Jesus is said to have said: "unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

I LOVED TOY STORY 3. There are so many parallels to what I'm trying to say this morning, I don't even know where to begin. It's not about the toys...it's about the children who bring them to life. For children toys become real. I wonder how many remember the story of the Velveteen Rabbit, the story about a stuff rabbit who becomes real. Toys become real to a child regardless of what grown ups say. Just yesterday Sheila told me about a little boy in hospice, Noah, who found the brand new hand puppets in the children's play room. He marched over to the nurses station and asked for a pair of scissors; he wanted to cut the tags off the puppets. Pointing to one of the puppets he said, "real people don't have tags."

In Toy Story 3, the child in question has grown up and is about to go away to college. Andy has stuffed his own "real" toys in a chest in his bedroom and they get worried. Will they end up in a garage sale, a garbage dump, the attic or donated to the "daycare?" Andy himself is torn with what to do. Even though his mother harps at him to make a decision about his room, garbage, attic, or donations, Andy leaves his beloved "real" toys in the chest, avoiding the decision altogether. Finally he makes the decision to store them in the attic and he puts them in a garbage bag. But his mom mistakes them for garbage and drops them by the curb. While they aren't picked up for trash, the toys find themselves seeking a new life believing Andy threw them away. Only the hero of all the Toy Story movies, the faithful cowboy – Sherriff Woody remains faithful to his "kid."

Toy Story follows the pursuits of these dozen toys as they come to terms with Andy's growing up. How many have seen the movie? This is one to rent friends. It's completely PG, there isn't a bad word or a steamy section in it. There are only parallels to the need we have for our own attachments and the long and difficult process of letting go. But you have to remember, the toys have life, only because the children gave them life...life in abundance. Going to the attic means they wait for Andy to have children of his own. The toys won't come alive again until he brings his own children home.

Well those who've seen it know there is a daycare program for newly donated toys run by the sinister Lotsa Bear, a mean spirited pink stuffy whose owner lost him and replaced him. There's a prison escape, a confrontation, a threatening ride on the garbage incinerator conveyor belt. Everyone is doomed until the three visitors from planet pizza use the claw to dig them out. I'm not making this up...this is how real toys become to children alive in the Spirit.

When Andy gets a message to donate his beloved toys to a little girl name Bonnie who lives around the corner and has a special way with toys, the promise of new life is realized. Andy gives his toys, and the toys come alive again as he plays with Bonnie and the toys for one last time. Andy remembers what it is to be alive in the Spirit.

Friends when Nicodemus asks Jesus "how can this be" I invite you to remember Toy Story 3. I would like to think Jesus pointed Nicodemus to the children in their midst and said, look how they are alive in the Spirit. Their toys come alive.

And I'd like to think it was Nicodemus and NOT Jesus who said the words quoted on the placards in the stadiums and football parks in this country. I'd like to think it was Nicodemus, who came to realize that God so loved that world that he gave the son Jesus, that whoever believes in him, also becomes alive in the Spirit, and has abundant, everlasting life. Imagine Nicodemus saying in a great aha moment "God didn't send this son to condemn the world but to save it...or in the true meaning of the original Greek, to heal it." May we all be born in the Spirit, and may our own toys come alive again. Amen.