Jesus Teaches a Teacher John 3:1-15

1. This last Monday evening, I was interviewed on a podcast about what place baptism should have in our theology. This sermon had been planned ahead of time – which we see God doing time and again. This well-known but little studied story is the right story for today – and for us as we prepare for Easter.

2. Nicodemus is presented to us as an honorable man, a man in search of the truth and willing to listen. He is a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He comes to Jesus at night (read nothing weak or cowardly in that) and seems absolutely sincere when he calls Jesus "rabbi" or "teacher" and says that he believes that Jesus comes from God. He believes because of the signs…which is to his credit as so many did NOT.

3. Jesus does not spend any time in small talk. While this looks like someone left a page or two out of the story, this is just the way stories were told back in Jesus's day. (John 3:3) The Greek here for "again" also means "from above" and I think we might have been better served if we had chosen that latter definition and we will see why later this morning.

4. Nicodemus, understandably, questions what Jesus is saying. Is he being intentionally obtuse, esoteric? We have all heard odd responses from Eastern philosophers (how many Zen Buddhists does it take to change a lightbulb? A fish). Is that what this is? I don't think so. I think Nicodemus applied the first meaning of the word and heard Jesus say that someone had to, literally, be born again out of their mother's womb.

5. But Jesus meant the other definition – "from above." The Pharisees were very, very strict about outer obedience to the law. They had a long list of every day requirements to show your faithfulness to God. Their intentions, I believe, were good but they left untouched the inner life of the believer. They assumed that getting the outer life in order would mean that the inner life was in order…and they were wrong as have been all churches that followed in their footsteps.

6. Jesus brings it home in John 3:5-8. This is one of the most profound and important sayings of Jesus and, yet, it is treated as one of those odd Eastern sayings and so we just shrug, say we “get it” and move on. Don’t do that. Listen to what he is saying.

7. When I was a boy and into my adulthood, we considered it our job to make converts. Almost all of these were already members of a rival church. When I look back, it is striking to see how few unbelievers or agnostics we reached. It was more an exercise in sheep stealing than anything else but we were sincere; we were certain this was what God had called us to do.

8. We would push baptism hard and we knew the passages where it was mentioned. We even had Bibles printed from the Star Bible Company that had a “choose your own adventure” flavor to them, guiding us from page to page to make our point. Our correspondence courses, filmstrips, tracts and sermons all pointed to baptism and we adopted the early American tradition of making an altar call but substituted baptism for the altar.

9. We often mentioned that baptism was not the ending of your Christian life but the beginning…but we weren’t very clear on what that meant. After baptism, we told people to live faithfully which meant staying in line with our beliefs about worship, church organization, etc. and agreeing with our lists of what is okay and what is not. Left untouched was the inner life.

10. Jesus is letting Nicodemus know that God is more interested in the inner life than the religious leaders of the day imagined. You must be born “from above” and then be open to move wherever the Spirit of the Lord moves. Life with God is not a predictable, known and published set of rules but a relationship with a living, moving, active God.

11. I literally know nothing about what I am about to use as an illustration. When I was a boy, I came across some large sheets of paper that were designed to be laid on a floor and used with a TV program starring Arthur Murray. It was a “how to dance” class that predated the electronic amusement games of today such as Dance Revolution.

12. What I DO know is that taking those papers to the dance hall and rigidly adhering to the footprints would not make you a dancer; that can only come from the inside and from being flexible and reacting to your partner.

13. It wasn't until 7yrs ago that I noticed that our prayer songs are in waltz time and suddenly prayer made more sense to me. Jesus lets Nicodemus know that life with God is a dance, a moving, changing, act of faith. When we reduce our dance with God to a rigid set of forms, we are NOT being born from above; the doors of our hearts are shut and cannot receive the storehouses of heaven.

14. Here at Our Safe Harbor Church, we get this. We never knew we were closed to where God wanted to go until we were pushed into the wilderness by a virus and by the rejection of church leaders. Once here, we decided to be faithful and let this be designed and managed from above. This terrified many who wanted to know what our organizational system and authority pyramid looked like. But look what God has done.

15. Jesus teaches the teacher some important lessons. (John 3:10-15) Will we trust the only witness we have of what God is like and what His kingdom is like? The only eyewitness is Jesus so, when he disrupts and upends your entire theology, can you handle it and just go where he is going?

16. Jesus uses a story that has long made many Bible students uncomfortable. (Numbers 21:6-9 and summary) Note that this order came to a people whose very core, the Ten Commandments, said NOT to make an image. What if they'd refused to go where God was now and do what God said now?

17. Nicodemus might think he had God figured out…but none of us does. God may call us to do things that we thought were absolutely forbidden and for which we have backup from scripture! But…do we trust Jesus? Is He the Word of God, as said in John 1 and elsewhere? If so, will we listen, open our hearts and receive whatever He gives, going where he goes, throwing away the sheets of paper

with footprints and procedures on them and just letting go and letting God lead?

18. We are entering into Palm Sunday and Easter – a season of impossible things that actually happened. This story is particularly apt at this time of year. Are we willing to believe what one song calls “The Glorious Impossible”?

19. And baptism? Baptism was a sign of faith, of loyalty to a teacher/rabbi, and as a sign of cleansing. It still is. It is a form of death, burial and resurrection – the theme of Easter. If you have not been baptized, please consider doing that now. You will not be marrying yourself to a system but to a partner, a living, moving, active, wonderful God.

20. And your righteousness will no longer consist in outer things but in your constant rebirth from above.