

**Payson United Methodist Church**  
**Rev. Michael J. Eaton**  
**Sermon Series “When the Spirit Moves”**  
***Born of the Spirit***  
**May 30, 2021**

**John 3:1-17**

<sup>3</sup> Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’<sup>8</sup>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.” <sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup>“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup>“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

My grandparents on my dad’s side were dairy farmers in Whitney Point, New York. Whitney Point is about 11 miles east of Binghamton. Our house

in Rome, New York was about an hour and forty-minute drive to the farm. I remember discovering our driveway connected to route 26 and route 26 would take us directly to Pagebrook Road where my grandparents lived. It was about an hour and forty-five-minute drive. I thought is cool that I could go to the end of the driveway and look south and know my grandparents were just down the road.

In the Northeast corner of route 26 and Pagebrook Road was a huge billboard. In large letters were the words, “Ye must be born again.” As a child I would read those words and become perplexed. How is that possible? I knew I was born from my parents. How is possible to be born again? It took many years later for me to understand the point of those words on that billboard.

Nicodemus in his conversation with Jesus has the same thoughts that I did. Nicodemus comes in the night. He may a fan of Jesus and wants to meet him. Why in the dark? Light and dark are motifs in John’s Gospel. Light represents Jesus, the light of the world, “The true light which enlightens everyone, was coming into the word.” Dark represents the people who do not understand Jesus.

The Reverend Dr. Derek Weber wonders “Did Nicodemus come with a question? Or did he come to score points?” Nicodemus doesn’t introduce himself to Jesus. He blurts out, “We know that you’re a teacher who has come from God.” Who are the “we?” What do they know about Jesus? In the verses preceding the Scripture today, Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover. He was doing many signs. Perhaps the Pharisees have now tagged Jesus as some kind of rabble rouser, and Nicodemus comes to gather more intelligence about Jesus to share with the other Pharisees.

I remember a man named Mark came seeking me when I served Payson UMC previously. I was offering a support group for people who were suffering from HIV and AIDS. Mark had been an intravenous drug user. We had many interesting conversations. We would visit either at his home or at Denny’s restaurant. Mark had suffered abuse from his father. I saw our time together as an opportunity to talk about God and life. David Ewart writes,

To be more clear. The logic of John is NOT: If you believe, then God will love you and save you. God's salvation is not a reward for belief. Nor does God withhold God's love, forgiveness and salvation until we believe. On the other hand, since love is not coercive, we do have to accept the invitation in order to actually be part of the family.

My goal was to help Mark be a part of God's family. Mark later died. I do believe he accepted God's love for himself.

Jesus speaks to Nicodemus. It looks like a sparring match is taking place. Nicodemus also says, "For no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." You want to talk about God. That is fine with Jesus. You can't experience God's Kingdom unless you are born from above. Jesus uses that tricky Greek word, *anōthen*. *Anōthen* can either mean "again" or "from above." Jesus throws this curve ball to Nicodemus. Jesus is talking about being born from above. When you think about the one thing we can't do on our own is being born. We burst into the world kicking and screaming. The same applies to being born from above. It is God's doing and not our own doing. In his book, *The Heart of Christian: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, writes,

Being born again is the work of the Spirit. Whether it happens suddenly or gradually, we can't make it happen, either by strong desire and determination or by learning and believing the right beliefs. But we can be intentional about being born again.

Though we can't make it happen, we can midwife the process.

This is the purpose of spirituality: to help birth the new self and nourish the new life. Spirituality is midwifery.

Again, it is God's doing and not our doing. It is up to us accept what is doing for us. Jesus is a gift to the world as we can see in verses 16 and 17 of our reading. God loves the world and shares his son with the world so that we can experience human life the way God intends us to experience it. One cannot know the meaning of human life without grounding it in the reality of Jesus' life and the corporate dimension of that life.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn writes in his book, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1915-1956*,

From the moment you go in prison you must put your cozy past firmly behind you. At the very threshold, you must say to yourself: 'My life is over, a little early to be sure, but there's nothing to be done about it. I shall never return to freedom. I am condemned to die — now or a little later. But later on, in truth, it will be even harder, and so the sooner the better. I no longer have any property whatsoever. For me those I love have died, and for them I have died. From today on, my body is useless and alien to me. Only my spirit and my conscience remain precious and important to me.

Solzhenitsyn says that, "Confronted by such a prisoner, the interrogator will tremble. Only the man who has renounced everything can win that victory."

The Spirit like the wind goes where it will go. The Spirit is always ready to infuse us with new life so we can be ready for what lies ahead in our lives. Perhaps you have felt a tugging that you could not explain.

Nicodemus appears later in John 7:45-52,

<sup>45</sup>Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why did you not arrest him?" <sup>46</sup>The police answered, "Never has anyone spoken like this!" <sup>47</sup>Then the Pharisees replied, "Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? <sup>48</sup>Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? <sup>49</sup>But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed." <sup>50</sup>Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, <sup>51</sup>"Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" <sup>52</sup>They replied, "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee."

Why couldn't Nicodemus speak up more about his encounter with Jesus? He could have told his fellow Pharisees that Jesus was not a threat. He

could have said that Jesus was the real deal. Do we wait on the sidelines trying to figure out how we will witness Jesus?  
Jesus gives us all a second life. A life that is born from above.

A little boy had been pawing over the stock of greeting cards at a stationery store.

After a few minutes the clerk became curious and asked, "Just what is it you're looking for, sonny? Birthday greeting? Message to a sick friend? Anniversary congratulations to your mom and dad?"

The boy shook his head, "No."

"Then what kind of card is it that you want?" asked the clerk.

The boy answered wistfully, "Got anything in the line of blank report cards?"

The kid clearly needed a second life as a genius.

We can be geniuses too with how we cooperate with the Spirit. Jesus wants us to be transformed. The mission statement of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. With a Spirit that comes from God above, we can do all lot to help the world become transformed. First, we live it. Second, we share it. Amen.