

The birth mystery remains a mystery

Rev. Terrance Jacob on John 3:1-17 at SALC on 3/1/26

So many of our youth get confirmed, even serve in various roles in Church, then they leave and even forget all they learned or were believed to have learned. Some even embrace religious patterns that are against Christ and Christianity.

Over ten years ago a confirmed Lutheran young man went into a church that was not his own and joined their bible study. The people accepted him. It was an African Methodist Episcopal Church, a Black church and he was White and Lutheran. They were having a bible study so they handed him a bible and notes. He was able to participate and at the end as they closed in prayer, this confirmed Lutheran young man produced a gun and shot 9 people dead, one being the senior pastor and a State Senator. During his trial he revealed that he killed them because Blacks were taking over the world and he wanted to save the "White Race" which he believed to be superior.

So what happened to this young man who learned the catechism and the gospel of love, equality and justice? His life philosophy did not compute with his confessed Lutheran - even ELCA - faith. He would have learned in Sunday School, John 3:16, "God loves the world so much that He gave His only son, that whoever believes in him, will not perish but have eternal life." We who believe become sons and daughters of God, one big family! One baptism into Christ for all who believe. Yet, his knowledge, even of the faith, did not connect with his reality.

Maybe he was confused. Maybe he had questions. Maybe he needed answers. So he went to Mother Imanuel AME at night, just like Nicodemis did.

Now before you get your, I mean get yourself into knots about my stretching the comparison, I am not equating them at all. Although it's likely that Nicodemis was a bigot - the Pharisees were a racist patriarchy, purporting to be superior to everyone else - Samaritans, women, the poor and the uneducated.

Nicodemis was educated, respected and from a privileged sector of society. Here was this lowly man of questionable company claiming to be a Rabbi, doing miracles and developing a following. "I've got to go and confront this imposter, because he cannot be legitimate. He's not from us. But, being astute at social decorum, Nicodemis had come to Jesus gently and without obvious judgement said, "Teacher we know that you are from God, because no one can do these things unless they are from God."

Jesus does not buy this patronizing - He's my hero in that way too. Jesus knows that Nicodemis comes with his credentials as a learned man, and that did not impress the Lord. Jesus cuts in, "Now listen, and listen to me good (Jesus was a southerner - at least he was born in the South, Bethlehem and moved further south to Africa in his early years, but I digress). So listen to me good, "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8 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."

Basically, Jesus was saying, "Don't come to me with 'We know that...' business. You don't know squat - or is it diddly-squat - about the kingdom of God!" Also Jesus knows that the learned

claim to know a lot about nature and the planet and will understand wind - that's how Pharisees were - so he references wind as a mystery in trying to explain the Spirit. Proving that he didn't know squat, Nicodemis asks, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" You see what Jesus does there? Nicodemis came to the Bible study and could even participate. So Nicodemis, if you know the scriptures, you should know about me and coming. You should have studied and even taught that Micah spoke of the messiah being born in Bethlehem. Isaiah spoke of the virgin birth. Hosea spoke of the messiah coming from Egypt, Africa and coming to develop his ministry in Galilee. And teacher of Israel, if you didn't like the prophets, it says right there in Genesis 22 and 26 about this coming time.

Head knowledge does not mean we know Jesus or that we have a relationship with God. That comes through being born of the Spirit.

A child normally does not see its mother as a vehicle to bring it into the world, right. The nature of being a child and a mother is that there is a bond, a relationship. The mother gives the child its identity. I'm not saying there isn't one with the father, but stay with me. I'm talking about the birth.

So what of being born of the Spirit. The Spirit gives us our identity and our life in Christ. When we are born into Christ's body, we have a new identity and we have a new bond. We have a new relationship! A relationship with God. A bond, a connection of love. It cannot be fully explained. Also, we cannot ask to be born. It does not work like that. So how CAN we be born of the Spirit? That "work" has to be done by the Spirit, by Grace.

So we cannot fault Nicodemus for not understanding what Jesus was saying, right. Mysteries are only embraced by faith, not by our own grasp of the concept or reality. Salvation in Christ is beyond human comprehension, that is why it is about faith alone, as Martin Luther said, and by Grace alone. Knowledge without the Spirit leads to heretical positions, like the one that young man visiting that bible study had.

To be born into this family, God had to come to us, reveal Godself to us and offer us a way, a lifeline. "Believe in me, even if it does not make sense," says Jesus. Nothing makes sense about this Gospel story, especially if it starts with a virgin birth.

Jesus says, "Simply believe in me - turn from everything else. Don't try to make sense of it. Nicodemis, just believe in me. Then let the Spirit give birth to you - conceived by the love of God."

When that happens we fall in love with Jesus! It's our identity: Child of God. It is not earned and we cannot lose it! We live to please Him in our love for Him and neighbor - that's the fruit. It's a mystery but that is the ground of our being: born of the Spirit, Saved by Grace through faith alone, grafted into God's family to do good works that God leads us to daily. Amen.