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John 3:1-17

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Riddles from Above

The first month I came here to be your pastor, the deacons led a retreat at Sierra View. We talked about how we read the bible and deal with differences. One thing that stuck in my mind on that day was when Gail, may her memory be a blessing, talked about how we mean different things when we say churchy words. Words like faith, love, and being born again mean different things to different people. A lot of that comes down to where we came from. We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen. So unless we understand one another, phrases like “born again” are like riddles without context.

Before we get into the narrative, I want to highlight its weirdness. Nicodemus, a religious leader, is going to Jesus. Nicodemus is part of an organization that will ask the Romans to crucify Jesus. Is he sympathetic? Is he genuinely curious? The text does not say, but in the gospel of John, after Jesus’s crucifixion, Nicodemus purchases the oils to anoint Jesus’s body and finds a place for him to rest. Nicodemus and Jesus are both Jewish teachers; they are trying to understand the same God and are hoping for the same messiah. What separates them is not a religion but the circles they run in. Jesus is a homeless lover of sinners, and Nicodemus is a respected and powerful leader. Perhaps Nicodemus is like someone who believes that Jesus is a prophet from God but is not willing to risk being ostracized by his community by openly joining Jesus.

But I have compassion for Nicodemus; the estrangement between Jesus and Nicodemus living such different lives meant they lacked the language to communicate. We can only speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen.

Let us dive into the substance of today’s scripture. Don’t you love it when Jesus speaks in riddles and double entendres (phrases that can have two interpretations)? Jesus talks about being born anōthen (a-noth-en), which can be translated to “anew,” “again,” or “from above.” Being born anōthen opens your eyes to see the kingdom of God. Being born anōthen is like a spirit wind blowing past you, like on the first day of creation when the breath of god hovered above the waters. Being born anōthen is like Moses lifting the serpent in the wilderness; whoever gazes

upon the snake would be healed from the venom. Jesus is speaking in metaphors; born anōthen is like being born from your mother's womb, but different.

What does being born anew mean?

For Menno Simons, being born anew meant an ethical transformation where people fundamentally changed their behavior. Menno saw a world of Christians who professed to be Christian but continued lives of lying, gambling, and fighting. Menno hoped that a new community of Anabaptists would be known for their shared obedience to scripture. As John 13 says, they will know you are Christian by your love. Or, to say it another way, the Anabaptist community would be marked by a shared language of ethics. We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen.

As I think about Nicodemus and Jesus. The Catholic & Anabaptist churches. Another through-line is the dynamic of power and class. The catholic church that Menno was so upset with were landlords, and the Lutherns were sponsored by Lords, whereas the Anabaptist movement sprung out of peasants.

In our polarized world, we can only speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen. Many people claim to be Christian or righteous, but I look at people different from me and wonder, how can we worship the same God? In our differences, I see Menno Simon's anger at fellow Christians; I see Nicodemus being unable to understand Jesus's words. I see people from different social locations who see the world differently than me. It is frustrating because I hope, and I believe the gospel of John hoped, that the gospel of Jesus could be universally received and understood. But time and time again, we tragically have received different testimony. Why can't everyone see the kingdom of God as I see it? Don't we read the same Bible and listen to the same Holy Spirit?

I would be lying to you if I said I had the answer. I do not believe the scripture gives us an answer either. This story gives us a truth about how the world is; because of numerous factors, religion, class, lived experience, education, etc, the Nicodemus's of the world do not understand Jesus. But Nicodemus still comes to Jesus with curiosity to hear Jesus's riddles from above.