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Sermon
March 16, 2014
Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Under New Management”

Scripture Text: John 3:1-17

Dear people of God, he came to Jesus under the cover of darkness, a ruler of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin which, in most matters pertaining to Jewish religious law, the Romans allowed to operate as both a civil and religious governing body. Though the 70 members of the Sanhedrin included both Pharisees and Sadducees, the Sadducees were always the majority. The High Priest who presided over the Sanhedrin was always a Sadducee and always appointed directly by Rome.

But Nicodemus was a member of the Pharisees, a stricter religious sect than the Sadducees. The Pharisees generally were more devout in their faith and provided many of the rabbis for the Jewish people. They were a tightly knit brotherhood and there were never more than about 6000 of them at any one time for the entire Jewish populace.

Today the word *Pharisee* carries bad connotations. If you look up the word in the dictionary, its definitions include “hypocrite” and “self-righteous person.” It’s too bad that the term has come to acquire those

negative characteristics because most Pharisees were among the most dedicated, respectable, and morally decent people among the Jews. They were for the most part as wholesome and spiritual a group of people as one could find at that time. The apostle Paul remained proud of his heritage as a Pharisee even after his conversion to Christianity.

We discussed in our Bible Study group why the Pharisees wrongly inherited a bad reputation, which for the most part belonged to the Sadducees. I won't spend a lot of time on that now, but it resulted because after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD, there were no more Sadducees who were the temple priests. If there's no more temple, there's no need for temple priests. And so by the time that three of the four Gospels were published and the Book of Acts, the authors of those works were projecting back into Jesus's time the hostilities that were taking place between the Christians and the Jews, whose leadership consisted of Pharisees, who were the only ones left among the Jewish religious leadership during the 80s, 90s, and early second century AD, the time when those New Testament books were written.

Anyway, Nicodemus in his day was a pillar of the Jewish establishment. He was respected by the people as a leading teacher and scholar, expected to set a good example.

Our Sermon Lesson this morning probably takes place in Jerusalem, for that's where Jesus is located immediately preceding this story and the immediately following story has Jesus and the disciples traveling to the Judean countryside. Jesus is probably staying in a friend's house. I've walked through the dimly lit and narrow streets of the Old City of Jerusalem at night and I imagine that it was not that much different in Jesus's day as it is today: relatively peaceful, quiet, and empty. In fact for the residents of the compound of the Armenian Patriarchate, if they are not within the doors of the monastery, which is the only way to get in or out of the grounds of the Patriarchate, by 10:00pm, they're locked out for the night. No exceptions. If that happens, they must find another place to stay until the following morning. Armenian parents of teenagers who live on the grounds of the Patriarchate sleep very well at night knowing that their children are safely inside the compound by 10:00pm. I imagine that Jerusalem at night in Nicodemus's time was very much the same. It was a safe time for him to visit Jesus.

Many of the Jews had heard about Jesus's teachings and miracles. Nicodemus did also. Though a learned man himself, he had many questions, no doubt, for Jesus. The fact that he went at night is usually held against Nicodemus as if he were a coward or wanted no one to know

that he was visiting Jesus. I'm not so sure that we should make those assumptions. In my brief time in Jerusalem, I found that the best time was to visit people at night. The sun is just too overbearing during the day. The cool of the evening there is very refreshing and a good time to sit and have pleasant conversation.

I think that it's to the credit of Nicodemus that he's bold enough to visit Jesus at all. To the Jewish establishment, Jesus must have looked like a potential troublemaker. First of all, he was from Galilee, not from the prestigious city of Jerusalem. That was roughly the equivalent in our day of a Tennessee hillbilly visiting Manhattan. Nevertheless it was noticeable to all that Jesus was gaining a popular following and the religious and political powers of that day were always threatened by populist upstarts.

Because of Jesus's miracles, Nicodemus concludes that he must be a teacher sent by God. And so, it wasn't just Jesus's teachings that attracted him. Nicodemus must not have been the typical Pharisee scholar whose head is always buried in the scrolls so that he never looks up to see what's going on in the world around him. When Jesus preaches about a kingdom, the people aren't sure if he's talking about politics or religion. I don't think that Nicodemus is sure either. He begins his

conversation with a complimentary remark in a polite fashion, confirming Jesus's credibility. But Jesus knows that this leading Pharisee hasn't come to visit him for casual chitchat. Jesus interrupts Nicodemus right away and gets right to the heart of the theological matter. He points out to Nicodemus that what's really important is that a person must be "born from above" or that person cannot enter the kingdom of God. Wow! You can't be more straightforward than that.

Despite being an intelligent man, Nicodemus misses the metaphor. He takes the words literally and asks how a person can go back into his mother's womb and be born all over again. Born-again Christians today make the same mistake. They take Jesus too literally. They take the Bible too literally. You need to have an imagination to understand Jesus. You need to have an imagination to understand the Bible. We can take the Bible seriously without taking it literally. The Bible is inexhaustible in its interpretation. That's why I can preach on the same passage of scripture and offer completely different sermons. That doesn't necessarily mean that only one of those sermons is the theologically correct one and the others are off the mark. They can all be theologically valid sermons based on different ways of looking at the text. Maybe a text needs to be taken literally. But maybe it's not intended to be taken literally. Maybe the

text could make sense with both a literal and a symbolic meaning. One sermon could focus on the literal meaning and the other sermon could focus on the symbolic meaning. And they could both be theologically warranted. That's the way God's word is. But you need an imagination to see that. Just like you need to use your imagination to see both a duck and a rabbit in this picture.

Jesus tries to use different metaphors to communicate to Nicodemus about the reality of the kingdom of God, but Nicodemus just doesn't get it. He disappears from the conversation as the dialogue turns into a monologue. We don't know where in this text Jesus stops speaking and the author of the Gospel takes over. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which we use in this chapel, has quotation marks right through to the end of our Sermon Lesson, right through verse 17, and even beyond. I don't think that's correct. I think John 3:16, the most famous verse in scripture, what Martin Luther called "the Gospel in miniature," "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life" was written by the author of the Fourth Gospel as a commentary on what Jesus says in this chapter. This most adored verse of the Bible is the

author's succinct summary of not only what Jesus says in the Gospel of John, chapter 3, but of the entire New Testament message.

The story of Nicodemus is a reminder of the sobering call of Jesus to those who would follow him. The kingdom of God requires a clean break, a fresh start. What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is something like, "If you're really interested in what I'm doing and saying, then you must have a different way of being in the world and looking at the world. You can't just tweak this and tinker with that. You must have an entirely new outlook on the world and of existing in the world. It's not just a matter of going to church a few more times a year or giving a little more to charities or praying a little more often. It's a whole different way of life. It's like kicking a drinking problem. You can't wean yourself off a little bit at a time. You've got to do it cold turkey, all at once, in order for it to really last. The withdrawal symptoms are evidence that you've licked the problem. That's what it's like to be born from above. It's an entirely new perspective on life and living. Like an alcoholic staying on the wagon, it can be very traumatic. For some, it's too severe. The rich young ruler thought that he was willing to do anything to inherit eternal life. Until Jesus told him the one thing he needed yet to do: sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. The rich young ruler couldn't

do it. To sell all that he had, to completely change his outlook on life and orientation toward life was too much. He wasn't able to make that much of a clean break in his life because he had great possessions. But it was not too much of a fresh start for Zaccheus, the tax collector, to make, though he too was very wealthy.

Some of you might remember Tim Quinn, for whom we were praying several years ago because he had cancer and then the cancer went into remission. Tim is a friend of Linda and my hair stylist and, you might remember, a famous Hollywood makeup artist. He recently was asked to do the makeup for Dolores Hart, a famous Hollywood star of the late 50s and early 60s. At the height of her popularity, she quit making movies "cold turkey" and entered the Benedictine Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Connecticut. Lest some think that Miss Hart couldn't handle the pressure of Hollywood and sought escape in the convent, upon entering, the Lady Abbess replied to her, "Now you have to take up a role and really work at it." Tim was asked to do Miss Hart's makeup for the Academy Award ceremony last year because she starred in a documentary on her own life, titled *God Is the Bigger Elvis*, which was nominated for an Oscar for Best Short Film of 2012.

Being born from above requires a clean break. It might mean a

clean break from your occupation, like Dolores Hart made. It might mean a clean break from your riches, which Zacchaeus made, but the rich young ruler could not make. It might mean a clean break from your guilt and failure. Nicodemus needed to make a clean break from his religious ideas. Some people need to make a clean break from their misguided goals. Some people need to make a clean break from their companions. Being in God's kingdom requires making a clean break with anything and everything that interferes with our faithfulness to God.

The splendid film, *The Horse's Mouth*, stars Alec Guinness as a conniving and uncouth painter. A young admirer of the painter asks why and how he became an artist. The Alec Guinness character looks through a broken window as though at something far away and says, "One time I saw a painting by the artist, Matisse. In that moment I was stunned and suddenly saw the world in color for the first time. God skinned my eyes; I became a different man; it was like a conversion." That's the way it is when we have been born from above. We have an entirely new perspective on things. There really is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. The world out there hasn't changed. But our view of it has! Because we're under new management as citizens of God's kingdom, it's like there really is a whole new world out there

because the change has taken place in here [put arms on chest].

Don't wait for the external world to change before you change. Change yourself first, and you'll be surprised how the world out there will change as well. The drunk can become sober. The miserly can become generous. The selfish can become considerate. All because they realize that they are under new management. Amen.