**The Spirit’s Longing**

John 3:1-21

March 5, 2017, David M. Griebner, Riverside UMC

 Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a season in the Christian year. It’s like the four Sundays in Advent that lead up to Christmas, only instead of four weeks leading up to Christmas, Lent is 40 days long and leads up to Easter. Each week during Lent this year we are going to study a passage from the Gospel of John.

Today we are going to look at John chapter 3. John 3 contains one of the best known verses in all the Bible, John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” In fact this verse is so well-known, so well-loved, and so important, that want to go right to it, we want to zip past all the rest of the chapter and go right to it.

To do this, I think, is to make a huge mistake. Why? John 3 begins with one of the most important conversations in the Bible, a conversation between Jesus and man named Nicodemus. And I think it is only when we start with Nicodemas and the conversation he has with Jesus that we can begin to see or appreciate the full measure and meaning of John 3:16, and everything else Jesus has to say.

So let’s take a look. First, who is Nicodemus? In verse 1 we learn that he is a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council, otherwise known as the Sanhedrin. Right away this tells us that Nicodemas is one of the most highly educated and Biblically literate men of his time. He knows his Bible, the Old Testament, as well as anyone. He is also a member of one of the most powerful groups in Judaism. The Sanhedrin is very group that will eventually find a way to have Jesus arrested and crucified. The thing to note is that Nicodemus is a smart, learned man. Furthermore, he appears to be not only learned, but open-minded, curious. He wants to know who Jesus is.

So let’s look at the conversation. Nicodemus comes to Jesus and says, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” My sense is that at this moment Nicodemus feels like he is in his own element. He wants to talk to Jesus teacher-to-teacher, rabbi-to-rabbi, as if they are essentially the same kind of person doing the same kind of thing.

All this changes with what Jesus says in response. Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” What? Where did that come from? Nicodemus is a smart man. He’s a Rabbi, a teacher of Israel, and he has a lot of knowledge, a lot of understanding, but he does not get what Jesus just said to him.

Here’s part of what is going on. The term “born again,” (or “born from above”) is probably a familiar term to Nicodemus. The problem is, he couldn’t see how it applied to him. The term “born again” described a gentile who converted to Judaism. A gentile who became a Jew was said to be “born again,” but Nicodemus wasn’t a gentile. So what could this mean?

Nicodemus expresses his confusion and perhaps frustration in what he says next. “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” He can’t wrap his head around this; he doesn’t understand.

And then comes the final exchange. “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” Jesus expands on what He just said, but it doesn’t help. And so the conversation ends with Nicodemus confessing more confusion. “How can this be?”

So what’s going on? And what does it have to do with the rest of the chapter, including that wonderful verse, John 3:16. Here’s my take. Nicodemus does not understand what Jesus is talking about, *but that is precisely the point*. He is trying to tell Nicodemus and all of us that what He wants to teach us cannot be fully understood or grasped the way we understand or grasp other things in our life. There is a limit to what we can know about Jesus, and God, on our own, or through our intellect or understanding or effort. To truly know who Jesus is and what He has done for us we need help. We need something more.

What do we need? What is Jesus trying to tell Nicodemus? And what is He trying to tell us? *We need the Holy Spirit.* And so for the remainder of this message I want to describe some of the ways the Spirit works in our life. Let me focus on three pictures, or three truths.

First, if you believe in Jesus you have the Holy Spirit in you. Paul says no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit so if that rings true for you, if that is who you are or that is who you want to be, If you have in any way embraced this truth, you have the Holy Spirit in you.

Second, what is the Spirit like? What does the Spirit want to do in our lives? Later on in John Jesus will describe the Spirit as the “comforter” or the “counselor.” So start there. Where do you need comfort or counsel? Is there something you are wrestling with? Maybe you are dealing with a difficult relationship. Or maybe you’ve got a big decision to make, or you are facing a big life change. Where do you need comfort or counsel?

But, now, third, come a little further. The Spirit longs to be a part of and guide the ordinary flow of emotions and attitudes in our life. Another way to say this is the Spirit longs to bring the right emotion or attitude into everything we say or do or plan. In Galatians 5, Paul describes what he calls the “Fruit of the Spirit.” “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Whatever else this is it is at least a list of familiar emotions and attitudes. These are the kind of emotions and attitudes that flow in and out of our head and heart every day, all day, for good and for ill. How often do you wish you could respond in a different way to something? The Spirit longs to give us the right feeling so that we are as whole as we can be and Christ is glorified. So I’m going to read this list again, slowly, and I want you to just be open to someplace in your life where you sense you need one of these right now. “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” I don’t think this is a complete list of all resources the Spirit has at His disposal, but it’s a good place to start.

Six years ago, in the fall of 2011, we sent our first team to Nicaragua to drill a well for Living Water. I was on that team. Just before lunch on the first day I was standing alone by the drill rig. And suddenly I was filled with joy. It was clear to me that this was not something I had produced. It felt like it came out of nowhere and it was so powerful I nearly lost my balance. It’s hard to put into words but it was very clear to me that this joy was not the product of anything I had done or anything I had asked for. It was as if Someone was rejoicing over me, and over the whole team, and what we were doing.

A few days later I had a different experience. As some of you may remember a few of us had our passports stolen and we had to stay behind for a couple days. I can remember struggling through those extra days, trying to hold it together in the midst of all that uncertainty. Several times I remember thinking back to that moment of joy and when I did I discovered that there was peace for the difficult moments I was facing then.

The Holy Spirit longs to give us what we need. He longs to meet us in our times of need and our times of joy. He longs to draw us closer to God, and fill us with more love and more understanding for who Jesus is and how much He loves us and what He has done for us.

Can you sense where the Spirit might be longing to touch your heart right now? Let’s pray…