

## **“Tis The Gift To Be Simple”**

John 3:1-17

Nov. 1, 2009 - FBC, Midland

(sing) “Tis the gift to be simple, tis the gift to be free, tis the gift to come down where we ought to be. And when we find ourselves in the place just right, t’will be in the valley of love and delight.”

This is an old Shaker dance song that speaks of the beauty of discovering simplicity in the complexity of daily life. It is a high and noble aspiration of all teachers to convey nuggets of truth and wisdom to their students, in such a simple way that there will be no confusion. Yet it seems that as students, we are often distracted, and many of us just don’t take in simple truths all that easily, do we?

Such is the story we see in John 3:1-17. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, who has studied the Torah extensively, and is even a member of the hallowed Sanhedrin, the high court of the Jewish synagogue. Here is a well-learned man. He has seen this Jesus of Nazareth perform wonderful miracles. He has heard him teaching the people the truths of God, and the scriptures are being “opened up” for Nicodemus in a brand new way. He has seen the fear and the angry reactions of his contemporaries, who are sure that this Jesus is just leading the people astray. But he is not convinced. He wants a ‘face-to-face’

meeting with Jesus to see if he is really the special person he seems to be, maybe even the long-awaited Messiah!

But Nicodemus doesn't want anyone to know that he has a few questions. After all, he's supposed to be the "answer man" for other people's questions, especially regarding faith issues. So he comes to Jesus by night. And the first thing he says is "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do the signs which you do unless God were with him." A very logical conclusion, well-thought out, cause and effect thinking.

I believe that Jesus was smiling at this opening statement, and responds by telling Nicodemus that the real truth about the Kingdom of God only comes when we are born 'again'. The Greek word that is used here is "anothen", which can be translated as "again", or "anew", or "from above". It has several meanings; it can mean "from the beginning, or radically new"; it can mean "again", like a "second time"; or it can mean "from above", as in "from God alone". Nicodemus, I believe, chooses to play dumb. He takes the very literal "second time" meaning, and asks Jesus if it is possible for him to go back into his mother's womb.

Now, I really think Jesus is smiling. He knows who Nicodemus is, and that he is one of the most learned men around. He would understand all the nuances of Old Testament teachings, and definitely would understand

that being “born anew” was meant in a spiritual sense; especially in relation to those who wanted to convert to Judaism.

So Jesus enters into a conversation where he talks very clearly and simply about matters that are of the spirit, and those that are of the flesh. Then he challenges Nicodemus to consider that the wind, or spirit, blows where it wills, and that those who are born of the spirit will understand.

Again, Nicodemus chooses to play dumb, I believe. He asks how these things can be. Jesus, who I think is again smiling, says, “are you not a great teacher in Israel, and you don’t understand these things?” He then makes a reference to Moses, which was very familiar ground for Nicodemus, as the one who lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, and says that the Son of Man must be lifted up too, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life.

Then come the verses that many of us have committed to memory. John 3:16-17 - “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him, might not perish, but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.”

There it is. The very simple, yet profound truth of the gospel. It tells us why Jesus came to earth. It tells us how much God loves us. It tells us that

we can have everlasting life by believing in Him. Yes, it is really quite simple. But that doesn't make it easy, does it?

Perhaps that is what Nicodemus had to struggle with. He watched Jesus' ministry for the next several years, and we see him twice more in the biblical narrative. In John 7:50, we see him asking that Jesus be allowed an opportunity for a fair hearing, when other Pharisees wanted him to be arrested. He was ridiculed, and did not speak out again. And then after Jesus was crucified, we see him one last time. In John 19:39-40, he and another Pharisee, named Joseph of Arimathea, took the body of Jesus and had it prepared for burial. Nicodemus brought a mixture of spices weighing over 100 lbs, which was very expensive. They both believed that Jesus was the Messiah, even though they couldn't bring themselves to defend him publicly.

The message of the gospel is really a simple one. God loves us so much that he sent Jesus to die for us. We must confess our need of God's forgiveness and accept his gift of salvation. This is the beginning of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. May God give us the faith we need to receive the simple truth of the gospel. Amen.

(sing "Simple Song").

