

Sermon, Pastor Mike Button

Occasion: 2 Lent Midweek

Date: March 19, 2014

Theme: Into the Deep End of the Pool

Text: John 3: 1-21

The Holy Gospel according to St. John, the 3rd chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The 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." ⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

May the blessing of the Lord rest and remain upon you always; for the sake of Jesus the Messiah. Amen.

I think I was maybe 5 or 6 when my mom arranged for me and my best friend Greg Martrain to take swimming lessons at the old Belmont Hotel. (Used to be on Airline Highway; I think they finally tore it down last year sometime.) Greg and I both loved the water, so long as that water didn't get over our heads. But when our swim instructors started coaxing us to the deeper end of the pool, then the water wasn't so fun. Even though our two young coaches were right beside us, letting go of the side of the pool to swim on our own was actually kind of terrifying. There was so much water and we were so small. We could sink and drown and nobody would know. It was scary. In the shallow end, though, we could just stand up and breathe through our mouths and noses without the slightest risk of sucking in a big gulp of suffocating water. Of course, we envied the big kids over on the deep end who were jumping off the diving board doing flips and

belly flops, the big show offs. But staying on the shallow end was so much safer and a lot less frightening.

In tonight's reading from John 3, Jesus kind of reminds me of a swim instructor trying to get a student to let go of the side of the pool and swim. The student, in this case, is Nicodemus, a Pharisee. He has come to Jesus to learn more about this remarkable teacher from God, but he comes by night because a daytime meeting would be public, and he'd have to openly admit his interest, which he's not yet ready to do. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus is like a man who knows everything about swimming, but he's never really gotten into the water himself. Jesus calls Nicodemus a teacher of Israel, which means that Nicodemus has given his life to studying God's law, following God's prescribed rites and rituals, and observing every jot and tittle of God's word. But does he know God?

It's possible, you know, to know all sorts of things about religion, without ever having encountered the mystery at the heart of faith. Every religious tradition has its Pharisees, including Christianity. These are the people who know every color of every hymn book that's ever been used in the last hundred years. They can put together a church pot luck at the drop of a hat. They can quote chapter and verse from the church constitution and bylaws. They've spent weeks, months, even years sitting in church, but they're no closer to being a Christian than if they'd spent the same amount of time in a garage trying to be a Chevrolet.

Nicodemus is a good Pharisee. He's not malicious or hateful or trying to put one over on Jesus. He's obviously intrigued by this holy man but he's stuck in the shallows of his own faith tradition. Jesus tries to coax him out, telling him that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," that is, spiritually. The Greek word for "from above" can, however, also be translated as "again" or "anew," and Nicodemus, who so desperately wants to stick to the literal, the familiar, the letter, not surprisingly hears Jesus saying born again, whereupon he asks, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" It's not that Nicodemus is stupid, nor is it that he's simply misheard Jesus. Rather, he wants to stay in the shallow end of the pool, because it's safe there, and if the water gets rough he can easily get out.

I appreciate Nicodemus' apprehension, because if he follows where Jesus is leading him, he's soon going to find himself in some very deep waters. When you start to swim out into the depths, it follows that you lose some control. You can't just stand up and walk out the water onto the dry land. You have to keep swimming. Now later in the Gospel of John Jesus will describe himself as the door, the gate, the portal into the heart of God, and God is, you know, oceanic. Deep and wide and mighty, God is so full of awe as to be awful, terrifying even. It's no accident that whenever anyone in the Bible encounters the living God, the first thing they do is hit the dirt. Whatever little command and control we may be able to muster is nothing compared to the sheer power and authority of God. It makes you want to fall to the ground, or at the very least, get to the shallow end of the pool as quickly as you can.

So why would anybody ever put themselves at risk of drowning in or being swallowed up by the depths of God? I can think of two reasons. One, life in the shallows is comfortable, but it's boring. The longer you spend in the kiddie pool, the more you begin to feel that you are betraying your own soul, which you are. We belong in the deep end. We are made for life in God, and nothing else will do. But two, we are not swimming out on our own into the heart of God. Jesus goes with us. Jesus bears us into depths of being itself. Jesus carries us to know God not only as all-consuming fire but also as loving Father, *abba*, daddy.

Every week in *The Times' Magazine* they run something called "The Meh List." "Meh" is neither good nor bad, hot or cold, cool or uncool. It's just "meh." Over the last generation or so more and more people have been putting Christianity on their "meh" list. They don't have anything against the faith. They like Jesus. They have no problem with me or you being Christian, but for them the whole faith scene is just kind of "meh." Yet whenever you ask these people what they know about Christianity, they talk mostly about church stuff that may be familiar to them

from their childhood or maybe what they've seen on TV – statues, candles, stained glass, people singing, or pastors preaching sermons. That is to say, they know the shallow end of the faith. They know the externals, the surface-y stuff without any awareness of the heights or the depths of life lived in, with, and for God. But how are we to say to them, “Come on in! The water's fine,” unless we ourselves will follow Jesus into the heart of God?

Nicodemus, by the way, finally made it to the deep end. At the end of John's Gospel he reappears with Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus' body down from the cross and place it in the garden tomb. That's what I call taking the plunge. Of course, he had a good coach.