

**Readings:** Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

Grace to you and peace from God who so loved the world... Amen.

The hardest lessons in life are the ones you have to unlearn.

“He came to Jesus by night...” our Gospel story today begins, which is significant in itself. Night is a time when it’s difficult to see. Night is a time when you can stumble and stub your toe. Night is a time when you might do something you don’t want others to see or know you’re doing.

But also (and maybe most importantly) in the world of Pharisees, when the sun went down and night came, disciples would gather at the feet, at the table of a rabbi to learn Torah – to learn “The Law” and to learn *the story of God’s steadfast love for God’s people*.

Susan Briehl tells the story of being a campus pastor in the Pacific Northwest. On a whim, she started “evening hours” at her office, but she was soon amazed at all of the students who showed up at her door “at night” asking questions: “Pastor, I just took an anthropology class and I saw this video about how the world evolved, but I’ve read Genesis 1 and I know how the world was created...”<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes the hardest lessons in life are the ones you have to unlearn.

Try this list on for size. It’s true, I found it on Oprah.com, but give it a chance. “10 Life Lessons You Should Unlearn:”

1. Problems are bad.
2. It's important to stay happy.
3. I'm irreparably damaged by my past.
4. Working hard leads to success.
5. Success is the opposite of failure.
6. It matters what people think of me.
7. We should think rationally about our decisions.
8. The pretty girls get all the good stuff.
9. If all my wishes came true right now, life would be perfect.
10. Loss is terrible.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From Susan Briehl’s lecture on “Preaching The Gospel from John” (Sept. 22-24, 2013 in Pierre, SD).

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.oprah.com/spirit/10-Life-Lessons-You-Should-Unlearn-Martha-Beck-Life-Coach-Advice\\_1](http://www.oprah.com/spirit/10-Life-Lessons-You-Should-Unlearn-Martha-Beck-Life-Coach-Advice_1)

So here's this man "named Nicodemus" who "came to Jesus by night [saying] to [Jesus], 'Rabbi,'" (and that's significant, Nicodemus puts himself as a student as a disciple before Jesus). "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God..."

And perhaps the first thing that Nicodemus has to unlearn is that someone who comes from God can't have a sense of humor. Because Jesus, tells a joke.

"A rabbi and a pastor walk into a bar..." *No, not that kind of a joke.*

More like this. *In her day job, she was an astronomer. But at nighttime, she was moonlighting.*

Or like this. *What did the combine say to the tractor? Come a little closer John Deere.*

Or this. "Jesus answered [Nicodemus], 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without *being born from above.*'"

Yeah, I know, it doesn't work so well in English. But trust me, it's hilarious in Greek. Unless you're Nicodemus, of course.

"...no one can see the kingdom of God without *being born from above.*" That little "born *from above*" part is a pun. Two meanings – "born *from above*" and "born *again.*"

Nicodemus doesn't get it. Nicodemus, as one person put it, "is a man who is too certain of his own categories (he knew what he knew, he knew it was true... he had to 'unlearn' what he had learned before)."<sup>3</sup>

"How can anyone be born [*again*] after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born [*again*]?"

Nicodemus takes the question literally, if not personally. Maybe, taking it "personally" isn't so bad, but it's the taking it "literally" part that gets Nicodemus into dangerous trouble in a middle school *Sex Education* class sort of way, doesn't it?

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Briehl. See first footnote.

So Jesus tries to throw him a life raft.

“Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus says to Nicodemus, “no one can *enter* the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit-wind-breath.” (You see, the life raft Jesus throws is tied to another pun.) “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit-wind-breath is Spirit-wind-breath. Don’t be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born *from above* / born *again*.’ The Spirit-wind-breath 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-wind-breath.”

Jesus can get a little “long-winded” in the Gospel of John (pardon the pun). But this is the best translation I can come up with: “Unlearn everything you’ve learned. It’s not about you. It’s about the Spirit choosing to blow where it chooses and being born into the least likely of lives.”

Because the whole thing about birth, about being born, about being born *from above* or being born *again* for that matter... the thing about birth is that literally, *God only knows* when it’ll happen.

I can’t help think of my sister who lives in Japan. She was due to have a baby about ten days ago. I’ve been talking with her on Skype and she’s ready to have a baby... but it’s not up to her, is it. Not exactly.

And so then, we’ll say, “Oh, the baby will come whenever it’s ready.” But do you really think a baby says to itself, “You know, I think I’m ready now to be born, let’s get this show on the road...”?!? No, it’s not up to the baby either. It’s not up to the mother. And unlearn what you’ve been taught that it’s up to the doctor.

Birth is as mysterious as death. The Spirit blows where it chooses. You hear the sound of it, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it goes.

Forget what you think you’ve learned about religion, about church, about God, about God’s love about getting into heaven, about being born *again*. “For God so loved the world that [God] gave [God’s] only Son, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life.”

I grew up (probably like many of you) with this verse “3:16” showing up in all sorts of places. At basketball and baseball games. Boxing matches. Political rallies. Back in the late 1990’s it was Stone Cold Steve Austin’s “Austin 3:16.” More recently it’s under Tebow’s eyes. You get the idea.

And God only knows how we learn these things, but it didn't it often seem like it was a warning. Like it was a twin brother of the guy who carries that other sign: "Repent! For the wages of sin is death!" 3:16 was, at best, a warning or maybe a litmus test, even.

But at its worst, it was a weapon, like a machete cutting down to size anyone who didn't say the right prayer or sign on the dotted line of "belief." Oh, and by the way, here's the list of ten things you have to "believe in..." which just so happens to be what *I believe*... What a coincidence?!

Sometimes the hardest lessons in life are the ones you have to unlearn. Because it's about love, isn't it? It's not a weapon or a litmus test, it's a life raft to a man stumbling around in the dark! Look at what Jesus says and tell me it's not about an earth-shattering, rescuing, free-gift of love: "For God so *loved the world (the entire universe, really, the whole cosmos)* that God gave God's only Son."

And, as if Jesus knows we're going to learn it the wrong way the first (or second, or fourth, or fortieth) time, Jesus goes on to explain the whole joke. "Indeed, God didn't send the Son into the world to *condemn* the world (or *that God might judge the world*), but in order that the world (from every star in the sky, to every flower in the field, to every soul here and everywhere) might be saved through him (*on account of, because of him*)." God's love is as big, even bigger than you or me or even the whole *cosmos*.

Not because you got the lesson right the first time (or the second, or fourth, or fortieth) time. Not because you're *getting it finally today*. But because God has a sense of humor. God loves a good joke. And the good news of God in Christ Jesus *is* like a pun. Do you get it? Or does it get you?

But the joke's not quite over. Because Nicodemus shows up again a few weeks from now. Later in John's Gospel, we read that Nicodemus and a few others, ask Pilate for the body of Jesus. And Nicodemus brings "myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds." And they take the body of Jesus from the cross, wrap it "with the spices in linen cloths" and place it in a tomb. Tell me that's not about love.

It's one of the last works by Michelangelo. In his 70's, it's thought, he carved his own face as that of Nicodemus'. May you also have the humility and courage to step into the story as Nicodemus. Sit at the feet of Jesus. Unlearn all that you've learned. And this Second Sunday in Lent, this March 16<sup>th</sup>, hold in your arms the full weight of the savior of all creation, this great love of God for the whole world revealed. Amen.

