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**Get Out of Yourself!**  
**John 3: 1-7; 19: 38-39**

C. S. Lewis tells the story of a little boy named Eustace, who was exploring a magical is land and went to sleep in a dragon's cave, only to awaken as a dragon. Once everyone realized his true identity, they realized the irony that he was a much better human being as a dragon than he was as a boy. As a boy he had been completely egocentric, absolutely self-centered. As a dragon eager for human company he was a wonderful servant to everyone. But of course, he couldn't remain a dragon. One night, the great lion Aslan led him down to a large baptismal pool. Eustace sensed that the lion wanted him to take off his scales and skin, but he couldn't do it himself, so finally he had to lie back and allow the great claw of Aslan to pierce his armor and peel it away, an experience that hurt terribly at first, but then was a pure pleasure. Then the lion helped him into the baptismal pool. When he emerged, he was a boy again. *Born again.*

When we first meet him, Nicodemus is not nearly so beastly a creature as Eustace, but he is a man at war within himself.

He is a prominent member of the religious establishment with a public reputation to uphold. Yet he is intensely curious, inquisitive, spiritually restless, eager to find a way to come to this young, controversial rabbi and ask the question: 'What must I do to have peace in my soul?' He says overtly and with conviction, "I know that you are of God," but he says it under the cover of darkness when only Jesus can hear.

On the one hand he wants to embrace Jesus, on the other he wants to maintain his respectability. He is a welter of emotions – which is something with which we can identify. Do we not also often have conflicting desires within us? Do we not on the one hand say, 'I want to lose ten pounds'; on the next we find ourselves ordering a chocolate sundae. We say we want to meet new people, then we find ourselves shying away from those we do not know. We declare that we want to become more spiritually mature, then we opt to keep ourselves from serious engagement with people of faith. All of us can understand what Paul means when he says, "The good that I want to do I do not do; it is the evil that I do not want to do that I find myself doing."

To all of us in our confusion, our Lord offers a solution: "You must be born again." So much has been made of those two words, to so little positive purpose. Is being born again some emotional instant of ecstasy that dramatically changes your life? Probably not. Is being born again some moment of violent renunciation of all that you have known and loved heretofore? Only in rare instances. To be born again, as Jesus' metaphor implies, is a painful movement out of ourselves. Our physical birth was a passage out of our mothers' wombs into another world. Our spiritual birth is passage out of our narrow little universe into a life oriented around God's Kingdom. There's an old novel that once observed, "Edith was a little country, bounded on the north, south, east and west by Edith." So, too, Nicodemus was a little country, at war with himself, bounded on the north, south, east and west by the fears and aspirations of Nicodemus. Many times we are much like him.

"You must be born again." What Jesus is saying here echoes the profound paradox that lies at the heart of the Christian understanding of self-development. What does our Lord say?

“You who would try to save your life will lose it; you who lose your life for my sake will find it.”

That is profound theology, equally profound psychology.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus as a egocentric searcher trying to turn Jesus into a spiritual guru:

what do I need to do to gain happiness? Give me the secret formula. Jesus says to him, ‘You miss the point.’

How often many of us look at the world as the stage for our story -- our story alone.

We ask the world to give us our desires and are angry with the world when it doesn’t obey our commands.

Nicodemus is doing something here that we are all often guilty of doing.

*He is trying to turn his faith into an instrument.*

Go into a bookstore and go into the so-called “spiritual” section, and there you will find a host of books that try to turn one’s faith into a device: how to be happy; how to be successful; how to be rich.

*This is a profound misuse of faith.*

In reality most every human life knows a measure of joy and sorrow, victory and defeat, hope and despair.

Such realities are experienced by people with faith and people without faith. The real question becomes,

as you experience this entire spectrum of life, do you feel yourself in conversation with the living God?

Do you feel yourself in ongoing dialogue with God, so that all of life, the good and the bad, becomes an

experience of the divine? Or do you feel yourself to be an isolated creature in a great void?

The more I ponder this passage, the more its truth stirs me.

The majority of us view the world from the interiority of our own fears and our own hopes.

We are preoccupied with our successes and our shortcomings, our virtues and vacillations,

our fears and our frustrations. Nicodemus comes to Jesus to ask, ‘Alright, what is the answer to life?’

As my spiritual guru, give me the answer that will make me happy.’

Jesus responds, ‘That is not what I am about. I am about ushering in the Kingdom of God. Get out of yourself.

You must be born again to be oriented around the commands of God and service to other people.’ You want

success? You want peace? You want happiness? Seek ye first the Kingdom of God.

Be born anew into a fresh way of looking at things, so that the concerns of God’s Kingdom

and the needs of the world are what moves your heart.

Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and then all that you really need will be yours as well.

If you can grasp that truth and allow it to reign in the center of your being, you will find great liberation.

How do we get out of ourselves? We must turn mirrors into windows. What do I mean?

Many of us often live in a world bounded by mirrors. We turn everything into a mirror.

Everywhere we look, we see ourselves, *our* troubles, *our* needs.

A friend confides a problem to us; all we see is how we’ve had a similar problem, only worse.

We fail are some small venture. We think everyone is laughing at our incompetence.

We see someone suffering. We are miffed that they hurt so badly they cannot see how we are hurting, too. We

turn all of life into a mirror that ceaselessly reflects *our* issues, *our* concerns, *our* responsibilities.

To mature in personality we must throw away the mirrors and turn our mind into a window.

When you realize that the world is actually a stage for thousands of others stories,

when you begin to be birthed into a world where the concerns of God and the needs of others are paramount,

then the world is suddenly a far more interesting place, and everything you experience is not turned into grist for your own story. Rather, you find that it has intrinsic worth in its own right.

When you begin to turn your mind into a window upon the world and begin to throw away the mirrors

that keep you imprisoned within yourself, that is the first step toward a mature personality.

I think of Abraham Lincoln, who had lost his heart to a fetching, if unstable beauty by the name of Mary Todd.

They became engaged, but then Lincoln began to be wracked by self-doubt. He feared he would not make

Mary a good husband, feared he did not love her enough. The fool, he told her so.

She broke down in devastated tears and soon sent him a letter releasing him from the engagement.

Then it was Lincoln who was devastated, realizing that he loved her far more than he had imagined. He wrote a friend, "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on earth." That's depressed! So, how did he emerge from his pain? He outflanked it! He went on vacation to Kentucky to see his closest friend, who was also engaged and was going through the same self-doubts as Lincoln. Lincoln found himself giving his friend the kind of advice that someone should have given him: 'Risk love! You are capable of it and will find great joy in your marriage.'

When his friend took that advice and became extraordinarily happy, Lincoln found himself vicariously pleased. In focusing upon the needs of his friend, Lincoln found the key to the prison of his own depression; he and Mary Todd were married soon thereafter. Though he was a man prone to melancholy and introspection, Lincoln became a great personality by learning to get out of himself and turn the mirrors of his mind into windows upon the world. Over time he found that devotion to causes greater than his own needs moved him to become an instrument that changed the very nature of our country. Mirrors to windows!

I think of that profound theological classic, *The Wizard of Oz*.

All of the characters begin fixated on their own problems: the scarecrow wants a brain, the tin man wants a heart, the lion wants courage. Dorothy wants to go home.

They all think they will come to the wizard, even as Nicodemus comes to Jesus, thinking that the wizard will simply wave the wand and Poof! all of their desires will be met.

Instead, it is in giving unto each other that they find what they desire.

In solving the problems of the road, the scarecrow realizes the great reasoning powers that he possesses and finds the brain that he thinks only the wizard can give him.

The tin man's compassion for all creatures reveals a heart that he thinks only a wizard can provide. The lion berates himself for his cowardice, but in loving those around him he proves to be ferociously courageous. Only in opening themselves up to each other in love and service do they find the desires of their hearts.

I think of a young woman in my first church in Kentucky whom I baptized into Christ Jesus in a borrowed baptistery on a cold January morning when the heater in the baptistery didn't work. I want to tell you, she was baptized into Christ Jesus fully alive! What I remember about her is that she couldn't sing. She had a low, monotone voice that would sing one note correctly and that continuously.

But as she began to act in our church Christmas plays she discovered that she was a born actress, or rather, a born-again actress, for it was only in finding herself in a church family that encouraged her to use her gifts that she discovered she was gifted.

The more the church encouraged her, the more she felt freed to use her gifts:

she became a star in the local high school productions, went to college on a theatre scholarship, and to the best of my knowledge remains involved in theatre professionally to this day.

Becoming a disciple of Christ didn't change her gifts, but the experience did illumine, engage and direct them. Being born again entails a long process of developing one's gifts.

I think of two households in that little Kentucky church that Melissa and I used to visit.

In one lived a mean, narrow, gossipy old woman who was completely self-centered.

In the other lived a sweet, mutually-nurturing couple who had been married for over sixty years and loved to play "Baptist poker" (also known as Rook) with Melissa and me.

To the eyes of the outside world, neither household changed, but over five years of visiting, we could tell a difference: the old gossip became even more self-centered: her character sank and shrank in scope as she withdrew into the universe of herself.

The old couple became even more loving and cherished as they gave so much of themselves away to others. One household was a black post that became all the blacker with accumulated malice;

one was a white post that shone the brighter with the application of new coats of love.

My point is, people change. They necessarily change.

No one remains the same, even when they think they do. Nicodemus had to change, one way or the other. The history of Christendom lists him among its champions because he changed in such a way that he grew in courage, faith and boldness.

If he had not changed in that direction he would have changed in the other, becoming more timid, more conflicted, more willing to sink within the safety of the herd. Instead, he came out of himself.

He came forward, along with Joseph of Arimathea to claim the body of Jesus from the cross and do him honor, spending an extravagant amount to attend to Jesus' slain body, even when it appeared that all he would gain in the effort was public disgrace and the memory of bitter tears.

Yet, Nicodemus' act of service was the first inkling of God's in-breaking spirit of resurrection that was about to be unleashed into the world.

This in-breaking Spirit of resurrection breaks into your life, too, calling you toward new birth, calling you to complete openness and submission to the commands of God.

Open your eyes to the needs of the suffering.

Give heed to the invitation of God to birth you out of yourself and into the universe that God has created.

If anyone is in Christ, he or she is being made a new creature.

To stay within yourself is to travel an avenue toward inescapable darkness.

To be about the daily process of being born again is to grow toward the promise of the Light of eternal life.

This is the path that Nicodemus chose.

This is the path we must choose also.

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