***“Born of the Spirit”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, March 5, 2023

**Romans 4:13–16**

13For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us [all]).

**John 3:1–10, 12**

1Now 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?

. . . 12 “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”

A warm welcome to everyone today. Welcome to our church family. One thing that happens when we have a diverse family is that people come into conversations with very different viewpoints. Today’s gospel passage gives us an example of an earnest disciple of Jesus’ who doesn’t understand Jesus’ viewpoint, and struggles to understand his message.

Nicodemus is a sincere Pharisee who wants to learn more about Jesus. Jesus sees that Nicodemus is indeed serious, and rather than talking about himself, Jesus jumps straight to the point, the *salvation* point: that one must be born again or born from above. The key to understanding this idea is verse 6: “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” This is his quick summary. To spell it out a little: that which is born of the Spirit, in human experience, is a transformed will and mind that have made the decision to discover God, to live in God’s way, and to embody spiritual values. To truly take on this new motivation is to be born again, or born from above. Most of you know the New Testament was written in the Greek language. Why do we get some translations that say “you must be born from above,” and other translations that say “you must be born again”? Because the same Greek word, *anōthen*,can be translated either “from above” or “again.”

Nicodemus is unfamiliar with this metaphorical way of talking, and doesn’t get Jesus’ point. Jesus is saying that believers need to discover a new way of living, a spiritual way. It is a whole new motive for living. As the church father Ambrose wrote, “Who is the one who is born of the Spirit and is made spirit but he who is renewed in the spirit of his mind?” (“On the Holy Spirit” 3.10.64, from *John 1-10,* Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT IVa, p. 113). So the mind can become oriented to the spiritual outlook, and actions can become infused with spiritual intent.

The Spirit becomes directive. I think that is the point of comparing it with the wind, which blows where it wants to go, so to speak. The Spirit is *free*. It chooses where to lead us. We do not control it. But we take on some of that freedom, that unpredictable windiness, when we are led by the Spirit. It is different from the rigidity of doctrinal formulas and structured theologies. It has the freedom of a free-willed personality, who leads us wherever he will. We who follow the Spirit do not lose our will, but our will becomes deepened and reoriented by aligning with the Spirit. This way, the message of Jesus sets us free. The words are simple but the meaning and the results are profound.

Another church father, Chrysostom, makes an acute observation about this passage: “Observe how Jesus never accuses Nicodemus of wickedness but only of simplicity and a lack of wisdom” (“Homilies on the Gospel of John”26.2; from *John 1-10*, ACCS NT IVa, 118). Nicodemus is seeking to understand Jesus, but not succeeding, at least on this occasion. He is a teacher of Israel, and *ought* to understand, but his literal-mindedness prevents him from understanding Jesus’ metaphors. Today we might say that he’s “lost in the weeds,” stuck in the literal and not grasping the big picture.

One needs to let one’s mind be receptive to Jesus’ images. The values are usually clear enough, but we will misunderstand the imagery if we are rigid and cannot see the point of a metaphor. “You must be born again” seems to mean “you must get a new start in life, and live by new values. It’s like starting a whole new life, one that is Spirit-motivated instead of flesh-motivated. If Nicodemus had been flexible enough to grasp this, he wouldn’t come across as being so dense. I am sure we have all at one time or another found ourselves struggling to understand a concept.

The flexible way of thinking applies to Jesus’ parables as well. We need to be receptive and open, like children listening to a story, and then we should have no problem understanding. Here’s another example: The kingdom is like a mustard seed that begins as “the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs” (Mark 4:31–32). This seems to be describing the growth of the kingdom from a small movement to a worldwide fellowship that is everywhere.

So when you are reading the Bible, be ready to recognize metaphors. The interpretation of metaphors is necessary to understanding the teachings of Jesus. He asks us to find the spiritual meanings of teachings about laborers in a vineyard, about a lost coin, a lost sheep, a persistent widow, about leaven worked into a lump of dough. He appeals to our common sense and our worldly experience to help us picture spiritual realities.

A believer must be a hearer of stories and an interpreter of images. Jesus often asks his followers “what do you think?” (Matt 17:25; 18:12; 21:28) or “what do you read?” (Luke 10:26). A follower of Jesus must be stimulated to think, to read, and interpret. He asks us “do you not understand?” (Mark 4:13). Understanding the metaphors is crucial. We don’t want to be as clueless as Nicodemus seems here.

I don’t think he *stayed* that clueless, because he is still an important disciple at the end of the Gospel of John, where he helps transport Jesus’ body to the tomb (19:39–42). Presumably, Nicodemus by then has *experienced* what is meant by being born from above. The impact of Jesus’ teaching is not only in the mind but also in how the words can help you *feel*, and can set your heart free from fear and bias.

Nicky Cruz was born in [Puerto Rico](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Las_Piedras,_Puerto_Rico) in a bad neighborhood and with parents who frequently put him down. He was later sent to live with his brother in New York City, and there he ran away from home and joined a gang. The preacher David Wilkerson came into the neighborhood. When he met Cruz, he told him that “Jesus loved him and would never stop loving him.” Cruz responded by slapping Wilkerson and threatening to kill him. Wilkerson organized an evangelistic meeting and while preaching, Cruz and members of his gang collected money from the attendees. They thought about leaving with the money, but Cruz insisted they give it to Wilkerson. Wilkerson gave an altar call, and many members of the gang came up and pledged their lives to Jesus.

Cruz and his friends turned in their handguns and knives to the police, and they turned their lives around. Cruz became an evangelical leader and has written six books about his experiences.

Have you discovered this new way of living? Have you discovered Jesus as Lord and Savior? Are you motivated to do good, to seek harmony, and to embrace truth? Are you flexible and receptive enough to let your mind be changed by the Spirit? You must be changed again. *Vive el cambio.* Long live the change. *Vive la différence*. Long live the difference!