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BANTERING WITH JESUS

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John 3.1-21

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.'

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying "You must be born again." The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that the deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly what God has done.

My grandfather was a banterer. He'd say 'good morning' in the middle of the afternoon just to see if you were paying attention. When you'd ask him how he was, he'd say 'Well, your grandmother's afraid I'm gonna live.' If my hair was too long, which it was in college days, instead of embarrassing me in front of other people, he'd say "Hey, Gar, I think your ears need lowering." When saying goodbye, instead of some sentimental leave-taking, he'd say, "well, bud, keep it between the fence posts." He'd playfully tease and taunt to bring a little humor into the room and otherwise add a little levity to the too-serious conversations.

Jesus was a banterer, I think. His witticisms are scattered throughout the gospel stories in what I think were attempts to get people to lighten up—and listen up—in order to understand serious things. Instead of preaching, he'd say something about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into heaven. He's not being literal, of course, because by God's grace, everyone gets into God's kingdom, poor and rich alike. But the startling ridiculous image made people think about the restrictions man-made rules imposed. It was a sort of holy joke, an image to make you laugh until the light bulb of understanding clicks on. To take such statements literally is ridiculous to begin with, but more importantly, literalism risked missing the point. As the oft-quoted theologian said: I take the Bible too seriously to take it literally.

Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish judicial system, comes to Jesus under cloak of darkness and Jesus uses the obvious paradox to talk about light. Nicodemus is eager to explore complicated things with Jesus. And to engage him in a discussion, Jesus employs the art of the double entendre as he talks about being born again. Nick takes him seriously, scratching his head about how that would physically be possible. "Lighten up" Jesus says in effect. "This isn't about things you can see but about things that can't be seen. This is about the spirit, about heart, about understanding beyond what the eyes perceive to be true." It's bantering at its best when Jesus talks about seeing with the heart.

Nick is still too much of a literalist to catch on to Jesus' good-natured teasing. "You're one of Israel's teachers, aren't you?" Jesus asked, knowing full well he was. Aren't you supposed to be one of the enlightened ones? Why is it you can't get beyond your own nose?"

Jesus tries again. Remember that bronze snake that Moses put up on a stake so that when people were bitten by a poisonous snake when in the wilderness, they would be reminded to trust God and be healed? The snake on the pole was meant to point to God; it wasn't meant to be God. The people had to get beyond what they were seeing only with their eyes to see with their heart the God who healed them. Sometimes what you see isn't what really is; the bronze snake is not the healer; but it points to the One who is. And in the same way,' Jesus said, 'I'm pointing to God. My miracles are not to bring attention to myself but to point to the One who includes the sick and poor, the women and children, the prostitutes and thieves and robbers in the family of faith. And maybe even these people before the religious folks, Jesus says with a wink.

"For God was so besotted with the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." It is important to note here that these are probably John's words, not Jesus's words. Each of the gospel writers reworked the miracles and words of Jesus to speak to his particular audience and his particular understanding of what Jesus meant. When John talks of Jesus being the only way to know God, it is the language of devotion and discovery, not a word to be taken at face value to condemn others to hell. It is the language of exuberance and the joy of realizing the good news that God didn't come into the world to condemn the world, but to love it and love everyone in it.

An example: My mother gave me and my three sisters our baby books a few years ago, and we began to compare notes about our first years. As a first-born, I had the most complete and detailed baby book of the four of us. As my three younger sisters came along, my mother's flagging interest in first teeth, and first steps and potty training was evidenced by the increasingly scanty comments in the baby books for the remaining three. But in MY book, my mother wrote upon my birth that I "was the cutest baby in the whole world." Go ahead and laugh; I think it's funny, too. After my three sisters

were born, my mother had to adjust her exuberance a bit, so she inserted the word 'boy' so that I was now limited to being the cutest baby boy in the world. Luckily she didn't have any other sons or she'd have had some more creative editing to do. But the point is this: here is the language of a first-time mother, a young woman elated with new-born life that prompted passion and wonder and delight when she wrote; it is not an objective statement of truth for the world that I was the cutest baby of all time. No one would ever read it that way and take it for gospel truth... especially when they saw the accompanying pictures.

John's gospel is full of hyperbole, about such things as camels and needles, and when he states that it is only through Jesus that the world comes to know God, it is the language of personal testimony more than universal truth. Just as Nicodemus initially takes Jesus's words literally "you must be born again" by going back into his mother's womb and in so doing misses the point, so we, when we look only on the surface of tradition and scripture without seeing with the heart, end up worshiping Jesus as the finger rather than the God to whom Jesus points. This is a personal understanding on John's part, not an exclusive truth that condemns Jews or Muslims or Hindus or atheists to perdition.

The good news is that God loved the world so extravagantly that he lived among us in One who was grace embodied, who showed us that turbulent times can be transformed into times of peace, that death is transformed to life, that evil can be redeemed and out of the ashes of ruin, the phoenix of new life rises.

Literal interpretation of the Bible has become a rampant epidemic in our country these days, resulting in the marginalization of whole groups of people and the deaths of thousands. The Orlando massacre last week is one of the saddest examples. A crowded gay nightclub was the target of an angry, mentally unstable man who killed the 49 people presumably because they were gay. There is conjecture that he couldn't reconcile his own homosexuality with a faith that condemned it. The motives for the killing are not entirely known, but the damnable response by several fundamentalist Christian pastors is as reprehensible as any extremist attitude of any political group. One said that the killer was sent by God to murder the gay people because God hated them and wanted them in hell. Another preacher flippantly stated that they were going to die of AIDS anyway, so this was just a way of getting rid of them before they cost us a lot of money. They believe and publicly state that these people got what they deserved. It was their own fault. Such attitudes come from taking the Bible too literally, by reading into the texts things that aren't there, and by assuming that God hates the people they hate. I always think it ironic that people who claim God draws a line between those who are in and those who are out always find themselves among the in group.

Violence against and hatred of people of various ethnic heritages, women and even children in days gone by is often justified by a literal interpretation of scripture that was never meant to be. It is exactly what Jesus condemned but sadly, people put words into Jesus's mouth for their own purpose, including politicians and clergy who, as public leaders, sanction hatred and violence against those they think God hates. Interestingly, God's list of hated people is usually the same as their list. It is abominable that politicians and religious leaders, of all people, should condone and encourage their followers to prejudice and violence, particularly in the name of the Jesus who gave his life for peace, justice and a love so encompassing that it included the whole world and everyone in it.

Ultimately Nicodemus gets it, for we learn later in the story that Nicodemus puts up a fight in the Sanhedrin to protest their condemnation of Jesus. For them, as for many today, religion is about what

can be seen with the human eye, what rules can be enforced that give the leaders power, and what labels and categories can be used to judge people according to our prejudices. In the end, Nicodemus is there to help prepare Jesus's body for burial and in so doing becomes a true disciple. Now he sees with his heart.

The good news Jesus proclaimed is about God's grace, not God's requirements. To read the gospel as exclusive and unattainable for anyone but those who follow Jesus is to undermine grace. If Jesus is a requirement for accessing God's love, then there is no grace. Krister Stendahl reminds us that we can sing our love songs to Jesus with wild abandon without needing to demean other religions. Such is the language of John. Such is the poetry of faith. Such is the joy of bantering with Jesus. Amen.

—Gary L. McCann