

The Anointing

John 2:23-3:8; 1 John 2:18-27

The passage you and I read together as our Call to Worship finds Jesus early in his ministry, in the Holy City, surrounded by believers that Jesus doesn't trust. All kinds of people responded to his ministry, it says in your bulletins, by "*believing in his name when they saw the signs he was doing.*" But John's gospel goes on to tell us that "*Jesus, for his part, did not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people and did not need anyone to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.*"

The point being that people, even believing people, are complicated propositions and, if you wonder what that means, just keep reading John's gospel in your bulletins because we're about to find out. Jesus knows what in a man, John said, and, if you and I are wondering, John goes on to offer us an example. "*Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews . This man came to Jesus by night...*"

So Nicodemus was complicated because, in hushed tones in a darkened doorway, he expresses a sort of faith in Jesus, wants Jesus to know the he and leaders like him were taking Jesus seriously because of the signs and wonders that attended his ministry. But, as John just indicated, Jesus isn't buying the sort of faith that grows from being wowed and dazzled in a miraculous moment.

Instead, Jesus goes on to demand of Nicodemus something more than correct answers to a pop quiz on gospel faith in a darkened doorway. "*Truly, truly, I say to you,*" Jesus starts out. That's Hebrew for "Don't miss this! Your life depends on it!" "*Truly, truly I say you, unless one is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" Modern translations will render Jesus' words, "*...unless one is born again...*" because modern Christians love the romance and drama of a brand new start.

But the Greek preposition here, "anōthen" can also mean "*born from above*" and if you read the rest of the chapter right to the end, you'll find that the whole chapter is about Jesus offering us to a life that can only be had from "*above*". God himself bestows it on us. John will repeat the same preposition, "anōthen," talking about Jesus at the end of this chapter. He writes, "*He who is from above is above all...For he whom God sent utters the words of God and gives the Spirit without measure.*"

Which brings us back to Nicodemus in the darkened doorway. What Jesus is saying to this pious old rabbi is that the correct answers about who's with Christ and where Christ's from won't be enough to get Nicodemus into the kingdom where Jesus is king. You must be "*born from*

above”, Jesus tells him. “*Born?*”, Nicodemus says in so many words, “*I’m an old man! Too late for a guy like me to be born!*”

So Jesus tries again, “*Unless you are born of water and Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.*” A lot of ink has been spilled about what it means to be “*born of water*”. To make a long story simple, my educated guess is that Jesus is saying to old Nicodemus, “You need to go down to the Jordan and find John the Baptist and announce to everyone who’ll listen that you’re a sinner who needs to change and let that man baptize you, in public!” Jesus says to Nicodemus in so many words:

“Be born in water and don’t care what it costs your reputation. But more importantly, be born in Spirit. Open your mind and heart and welcome the Spirit to do his thing there whatever it costs you. Don’t treat God like a flat schematic that can be mastered, don’t treat God as a pretty abstract concept who, if you learn enough correct answers, you can earn a grade that will get you under the wire.” The point here is that none of us will get into the heaven with the cards we hold in our hand. But there’s a wild card on offer “*from above*”. God the Holy Spirit awaits our invitation to enter our hearts and turn us into someone essentially different than who we are now.

“*What is born of flesh is flesh,*” Jesus said, “*what is born of Spirit is spirit.*” We don’t change ourselves with good thoughts and programs and New Year’s resolutions. God changes us, his Spirit brings us to want him, and when we invite him in, he brings us through a walk, teaches us a way of life that we couldn’t hope to live unless his Spirit gave it to us. “*The wind blows where it will, you hear its sound, but you don’t know where it came from or where it’s going.*”

“*So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*” The real difficulty of Jesus’ ultimatum to Nicodemus is that what God wants from us involves a surrender of sovereignty, a loss of control. Not in the absolute sense that the Spirit puts us in a trance and we have no decisions to make. God doesn’t do that! But in the sense that once we welcome the Spirit into our hearts, we belong to God, and his Spirit will impel us, teach us over time to please God over and against pleasing ourselves, which is both hard and unexpectedly liberating when it ever happens.

C. S. Lewis defined joy as happiness tinged with pain. Joy is that happiness we gain when the Spirit teaches us to love God first, and to do what is right for others at our own cost, which is an entirely different thing than codependency, because we look to God, to the Spirit, for love and affirmation and fullness, not to the people who need us or the people we need when we feel hurt and weak. It is a heart reorientation “*from above*” that gains traction only as the Spirit teaches us to trust him and want him enough to learn it from his Word and to live it out together in the church.

Which leads us to John in this letter as an old man near the end of his life, warning Christians young enough to be his grandchildren that they had entered an age where antichrists would be sprouting up like dandelions. *“Children,”* he writes them, *“it’s the last hour, and as you’ve heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen. This is how we know that it’s the last hour.”*

In those days, John’s readers had already seen an antichrist march into old Jerusalem and tear down all the buildings and furniture that old Israel thought would keep them close to God. And those events stirred a tide that set the new Christian congregations all a-swirl. John has already had to teach them that the commandments still hold, that right is still right and wrong is still wrong and God is still God. But what about this made the old apostle think he was living in the last hour 2000 years ago. In what sense could John tell people so long ago that it was *“the last hour”*?

Of course, John was seeing the progress of history through the eyes of Jesus, who, in Matthew 24 on the slope of Mount Olive, had warned all the disciples that an antichrist would stand in the holy place, Jesus said, and set into motion what Jesus called *“a great tribulation”*, a tide of evil the likes of which old Israel had never seen because God had always preserved old Israel for the day when Christ would come to save us all from the evil and trouble and judgment that our sins deserve.

But now, John tells us, old Israel is gone. Now Christ is risen from the grave and ascended into heaven, and God’s Spirit is on the loose and the last stage of God’s plan to save people like us is in effect. And what Jesus taught was that, with the spread of his Church all over the world, living and teaching the truth everywhere, all that goodness would be attended in the last days by a level of deceit and trouble and folly designed to distract us people from Christ and Church marriage and family, gospel and faith.

Jesus described this last stage of history this way, he said, *“For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders so as to lead astray even the elect.”* So when John says, *“Children, it is the last hour...”*, he’s not saying you got 60 minutes or till tomorrow or next week or even next year, what John’s saying is that we’re in that last stage Jesus spoke about. And how does John know it’s the last hour? Many anti-christs have arisen, he tells us, just like Jesus said they would. That’s how we know, John tells us.

And one of the perplexing features of this *“last hour”* is that deceit and evil will wriggle its way into and through and out the Church. The church will become a venue for lies and deceit. So John says of the antichrists, *“They went out from us...”*. He goes on, *“...but they were not of us, because if they were of us, they would have abided with us. It was to show that they were not*

of us that they went out.” So one way we can identify an antichrist in the swirl of drama and circumstance is that an antichrist won’t “*abide*” in the Church, won’t endure gospel teaching, won’t persevere with God’s people as time goes on.

But faithlessness to the ministries of the church and the rejection of gospel teaching and the abandonment of God’s people are just the symptoms of being an antichrist. The heart of the matter, John tells us, is that an antichrist won’t let Jesus be the Christ, won’t let Jesus be the king God meant him to be in God’s kingdom. Poke an antichrist, press him or her just a little and what he’ll tell you is that God isn’t God, a commandment isn’t really a commandment, right isn’t right, wrong isn’t wrong.

Because an antichrist feels perfectly free to imagine Jesus to be whatever he or she needs Jesus to be. Don’t trouble an antichrist with any loss of sovereignty or control. Don’t require an antichrist to go to the Jordan and announce he’s a sinner who needs to start life over. You can be gay. You can be faithless to Sunday worship and covenant commitments. You can keep the priorities you have and exercise the values you prefer. Because for an antichrist, Jesus isn’t really Christ and he can be reshaped to approve of what we already think, what we’re already used to.

Just don’t try to invite the Spirit into your heart and then live as if what God’s Word commands is optional. John doesn’t warn the early Christians that the solution to an antichrist is to be more precise and fussy about doctrine. The Pharisees were fussy and precise about doctrine and still managed to twist God’s word to suit their culture, their prejudice, their chauvinism. “*Can we divorce our wives whenever we want?*” they asked Jesus in Matthew’s gospel. They twisted God’s word to suit their perspective, their traditions and Jesus called them on it early and often.

What John prescribes for the young believers in the early churches was something they already had: “*You have an anointing from the Holy One and you all know.*” Like Nicodemus in the darkened doorway, the early believers had learned from Jesus that true faith happens, real change happens only after we surrender our sovereignty, hand over control of our lives to that Spirit from above whom Jesus has sent to teach us to be children in God’s care, sheep in God’s flock. It’s a matter of heart orientation. It involves believing that the Spirit is real and here and letting him be boss.

Paul wrote in one of his letters, “*Knowledge puffs up...*”, doctrine makes proud, “*but*”, Paul goes on, “*love builds up.*” He wrote again in another place “*Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh.*” When the Spirit is given his proper place in our hearts, Paul goes on to teach, our lives blossom with spiritual qualities like a tree blossoms with buds and then flowers and then fruit. “*For the fruit of the Spirit*”, Paul writes, “*is love, joy, peace*

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” What he means to say is that only the Spirit can provide the heart orientation that will make God’s Word ultimately make sense.

Please don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying that doctrine doesn’t matter. I spend hours and hours every Wednesday studying and teaching God’s Word so that a handful of people here will know the truth they need to recognize and oppose the swill that antichrists are feeding the Church today. The Word of God is the tool the Spirit uses to refine our hearts so that we’ll know up from down, right from wrong when antichrist comes calling. But the first word of gospel that Jesus taught Nicodemus and us, that John wants the early Christians and us to remember is that doctrine is only ever of any use when our hearts are open and we are willing to be small and subject to God’s Spirit.

“Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you.” John writes, *“If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Father and in the Son...the anointing that you received from him abides in you and you have no need that anyone should teach you, but his anointing teaches you about everything and is true and is no lie...”*

What we heard from the beginning is that Jesus is the Christ, the Father is our Father, and the Spirit is ultimately our guide and protector in the swirl and drama of the last days. Let God be God in our hearts, let his Spirit rule what we think and feel, and we will not be susceptible to a gospel where some human teacher steals us from Christ and Church, marriage and family, gospel and faith. There is a place for human teachers in the lives of God’s people.

The Spirit has provided the church with a whole panoply of gifts to be exercised in relationships where the fruit of the Spirit is cultivated and encouraged. What John is warning here is that we should not let some eloquent antichrist entice us away from all that. Because to have the Spirit in our hearts is to hold God’s people in our hearts as well. The first fruit of the Spirit is love, Paul taught, not in the abstract, not in theory, but in the give and take of daily relationships in family and church.

The first sign of a disciple is that we love one another, Jesus said, after actually washing his disciples’ feet. The very notion that the truth could be learned from strangers in an environment where those relationships don’t take place is foreign to what Jesus and Paul and John ever taught. *“Knowledge puffs up, but love (heart to heart face to face love) builds up”* The fruit of the Spirit is love.