

John 3:1-17  
March 20, 2011 Lent II

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### ☞ Change or Not to Change+

The word Lent means "spring," and comes from the root meaning "lengthen." This week I have enjoyed longer days, and with the first official day of spring being tomorrow, I do hope that Old Man Winter has finally been put to bed.

I have enjoyed seeing the daffodils and camellias bloom and the beautiful budding of the Bradford Pear Trees. Spring is a time for change; Lent is also a time for change. During this season, we focus on the life of Jesus and wonder how our lives need to change so that we can live more like him.

Our New Testament Lesson records a story of considerable change for a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Pharisees understood dedication; some considered them to be the best of their society. These were the people who regularly appeared in the "Lifestyle" section of the newspaper highlighting their good deeds; these men would be the ones who were photographed giving a check to an organization who needed it; for perfect attendance at civic clubs; for promoting nationalistic pride in their culture.

Jews understood that the Law, the first five books of our Bible, was to be the rule of life and their connection to God. Pharisees recognized these writings to be the *perfect* word of God, therefore it contained everything they needed to know about how to live. Scribes studied the Law in order to deduce the finer points of what God had intended; Pharisees vowed to keep this strict understanding of the Law.

Shining a light onto their understanding of Sabbath observance offers a glimpse into the life of a Pharisee. The fourth commandment reads, "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work— you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it." (Exodus 20:8-11)

Scribes had to determine the definition of work, and the Pharisees sought to live out that understanding. William Barclay explains an example of how the Scribes understood work on the Sabbath, "To tie a knot on the Sabbath was work; but a knot had to be defined. The following are the knots the making of which renders a man guilty; the knot of camel drivers and that of sailors; and as one is guilty by reason of tying them, so also of untying them." On the other hand, knots which could be tied or untied with one hand were quite legal. Further, "a woman may tie up a slit in her shift and the strings of her cap and those of her girdle, the straps of shoes or sandals, of skins of wine and oil." Now see what happened. Suppose a man wished to let down a bucket into a well to draw water on the Sabbath day. He could not tie a rope to it, for a knot was illegal on the Sabbath; but he could tie it to a woman's girdle and let it down, for a knot in a girdle was quite legal. That was the kind of thing which to the scribes and Pharisees was a matter of life and death; that was religion; that to them was pleasing and serving God." (William Barclay, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1975. P. 121-122)

Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee but a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the supreme court of the Pharisees. His dedication to the keeping of the Law superceded anything and everything in his life. He lived in a world of black and white, not speaking of races, but of absolutes. He was the kind of guy who regularly used the words "always" and "never."

For all the knowledge he had acquired, for all the education he had received, for all the seminars he had attended, he still felt a bit empty, especially when seeing and hearing about this up-and-coming Rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth. As a veteran Pharisee, Nicodemus knew all the right people. At any given time, there were only 6,000 of them and as a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus knew every Pharisee.

Yet here was a rookie teacher who was creating quite a stir. Word traveled quickly about his first miracle: changing water into wine at a wedding, after all, the aristocrats of the day attended such grand social functions. Their presence offered a blessing of sorts to the newlywed couple.

Then at the Passover, Jesus drove out the moneychangers from the Temple which drew even more attention. The people who witnessed this event wondered how he acted with such authority; they wondered what sign he would do next. When people become dazzled by feats which grab your attention, you sit on the edge of your seat wondering what the person might accomplish next.

For a high-ranking Pharisee like Nicodemus, approaching Jesus in public presented its own set of problems. If someone saw Nicodemus stooping to speak to someone like Jesus, they could get the wrong impression. After all, people like Nicodemus had reputations to uphold.

So Nicodemus decided to approach Jesus under the cover of darkness; this clandestine meeting could prevent any possible tainting or even the appearance of tainting. Nicodemus recognized that Jesus *had* something, as evidenced by the signs and wonders being performed. Obviously a person who could offer the miraculous had to have a connection to the Divine.

Jesus told Nicodemus that no one could *see* the Kingdom of God without begin born from above. I think that Jesus was quite deliberate with his choice of words. He said that to *see* the Kingdom of God, one must be born from above. Remember that Nicodemus was a Pharisee; he left nothing to chance. Every jot and tittle of the Law had to be explained, rehearsed, and he had dedicated his life to the keeping of the Law. How does one *see* the Kingdom of God? To *see* the Roman Empire, a person had to be born as a Roman citizen, and Pharisees saw the Roman Empire as their captors. They lived under Roman rule with permission to practice their religion as long as it did not interfere with the Empire. To see or to experience any Kingdom required proof: Jesus said you must be born from above.

This created quite a dilemma for the Pharisee who seemingly understood everything religious. He had dedicated himself to understanding and then doing what he understood to be the right and religious thing. But there was a barrier; Jesus requested that Nicodemus would need to *change* in order to see the Kingdom of God. Pharisees, who were members of the Sanhedrin, implored others to change, but they did not see any reason for themselves to change. After all, they were already doing everything right.

We all understand roadblocks to change. If a person does not want to change, that person can shoot with pinpoint accuracy at a target not even on the playing field in question; that person can create a smokescreen to divert attention to cover an aversion to change.

Nicodemus did not want to change, because he saw no need for change, so he deliberately tried to misunderstand what Jesus meant. We see this action in younger children. If a child doesn't want to eat green beans, they might say, "I don't like the color green." In the final analysis, the tint and shade of the vegetable matters not; the child doesn't want to eat green beans, because the parents suggest it or the child does not like the taste, or the child has never tried it. If someone does not want to change, that person can intentionally choose not to change and can offer any reason for support. If a person is complacent and satisfied with their current status, even if other factors of society continually communicate that change is necessary, the person can still dig in their heels and refuse to change.

A few weeks ago, we got new carpet for the sanctuary. Changing the color of this carpet would have been unthinkable for many. Changing the code on the numeric keypad at the back of our church becomes a roadblock to some. Some of you have told me, "We just don't like to change." Yet I am grateful that I was able to type this sermon on a personal computer, because my first sermons were all on legal pads or notebook paper. I am grateful that our services are recorded on DVDs; this week, a couple of our church members inventoried a small classroom of audio-visual equipment which included cassette tape players, slide projectors and slide trays, film projectors and even a reel-to-reel tape recorder. I am grateful that our bulletins were copied from a copier rather than a mimeograph machine and that they were folded by a machine. I am grateful for change.

Most of you would join me in admitting that change can be good and doesn't always have to be difficult. Perhaps the strongest aversion to change would be in attitudes and motivations. The scribes and Pharisees had worked tirelessly to make sure that people would act the correct way; not a whole lot of effort was poured into the

*attitudes* behind the behavior.

To be born from above denotes a change; this type of change does not automatically result because of increased study or humanitarian aid. To be born from above begins with God. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." Without God at the beginning, one cannot be born from above. "So that everyone who believes in him should not perish but may have eternal life." Because God gave, we can believe. If God had not loved, we could not believe.

Lent is the season when we examine the life of Jesus and realize that we fall short; this is not the time when we look at the life of Jesus and say, "I am adequately satisfied with my behavior and attitudes and I don't want to be changed." For those who make that status quo claim, you will get your wish; you will not be changed.

But for those who try to live like Christ, we will always need to be changed. For those of us who want to be called Christian, meaning "little Christs," we continually need to examine motives and behavior recognizing that changes of the heart, to be born from above, requires an action on God's part. To remove our impatience, our pride, our unforgiving spirits, our prejudices, our greed, our arrogance, indeed to remove our sin, we have to rely on God. This radical change has to come from above but can only occur if we pose the question, "To change or not to change?" If we say "yes" to changing ourselves to be more like Christ, then the next step is requesting God to change our hearts, our motives, our attitudes so that our conduct will then be more Christ-like.

During this Lenten Season, we need repeatedly to ask, "To change or not to change?" That is the question. What will be your answer?