

Do you know that expression, “live and learn”? I looked it up to make sure. “Live and learn” is “used to say that one has learned something from an experience that is surprising and usually unpleasant!” (Merriam-Webster)

I didn’t know about the unpleasant part. I just figured that if we are paying attention, we will learn, just by living.

There are other ways to learn, of course. Some are on purpose, say, going to school, taking a class, reading a book, having on-line courses, seminars, retreats.

Or, we can visit someone who is smart and wise and all that, and learn that way, “pick his brain.” Here we go again, another figure of speech. This one means “obtain information by questioning someone who is better informed about a subject than oneself.” (computer)

That is what Nicodemus did in the Scripture lesson from the book of John. He went to visit Jesus, one night, to learn from him.

That was a good thing to do; it was even a brave thing to do. You see, Nicodemus had his own position to consider. He was a Pharisee. They were leaders, and as Jesus said, teachers of Israel. The Pharisees were very, very devout Jewish people. They took the laws of God so extremely seriously. Probably too seriously.

The Pharisees had gotten to the point of loving their laws and traditions so much that they looked at God as a strict lawgiver and judge. Or as C. S. Lewis once put it, “a cosmic spoil-sport.”

At any rate, the Pharisees, at that point in time, were very opposed to Jesus and his belief in God as a loving, cosmic Father.

That, and the human failing of not wanting to give away or share power, put the Pharisees really at odds with Jesus.

Even so, Nicodemus went to visit Jesus and try to learn from him. I’m not sure he was all that successful, but he tried.

Nicodemus was sure that Jesus must be from God, because Jesus had done miracles. That is also to Nicodemus' credit; he wasn't downplaying the miracles or denying them or trying to explain them away.

"When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he said that no one could help being impressed with the signs and wonders that he did. Jesus's answer was that it was not the signs and wonders that were really important; the important thing was such a change in a [person's] inner life that it could only be described as a new birth." (The Gospel of John, volume 1, by William Barclay)

Nicodemus and Jesus went back and forth on the concept of new birth, being born again, and so forth.

Nicodemus made the mistake of taking the words literally. It was as if he were saying "What? A grown man, born again, from his mother? Re-doing the whole thing physically?"

But, of course, Jesus meant that "Belief must be so total that one has, in essence, been born again . . ." (Storyteller's Companion to the Bible, John, volume 10, Michael E. Williams.)

Now, lots of us are really familiar with the term born-again. "Language about 'being born again' and 'new birth' and 'regeneration' has been used in various Christian heritages [and churches] . . . United Methodists have understood that Jesus was inviting followers to a new birth from above" (Being United Methodist in the Bible Belt, by F. Belton Joyner, Jr.)

Jesus was talking about a spiritual new birth, a spiritual new beginning. Then, some details were added, when he said that "no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of Spirit and water."

One book had this to say, and I thought that it was very helpful in explaining: "It is quite clear that, as we are and in our own strength, we are quite unable to [give] to God . . . perfect obedience; it is only when God's grace enters into us and takes possession of us and changes us that we can give to him the reverence and the devotion we ought to give. It is through Jesus Christ that we are reborn; it is when he enters into possession of our hearts and lives that the change comes.

When that happens we are born of *water and the Spirit*. . . *Water* is the symbol of cleansing. When Jesus takes possession of our lives, when we love him with all our heart, the sins of the past are forgiven and forgotten. *The Spirit* is the symbol of *power*. When Jesus takes possession of our lives it is not only that the past is forgotten and forgiven; if that were all, we might well proceed to make the same mess of life all over again; but into life there enters a new power which enables us to be what by ourselves we could never be and to do what by ourselves we could never do. Water and the Spirit stand for the cleansing and the strengthening power of Christ, which wipes out the past and gives victory in the future. . . .

To be born again is to be changed in such a way that it can be described only as rebirth and re-creation. The change comes when we love Jesus and allow him into our hearts. Then we are forgiven for the past and armed by the [Holy] Spirit for the future; then we can truly accept the will of God. And then we become citizens of the kingdom; then we become sons [and daughters] of God; then we enter into eternal life, which is the very life of God.” (Barclay)

This new birth, at least in our denomination, does not have to be a sudden, one-time event. It can also be becoming a Christian over time, and growing into it.

Paul, in the Bible, for instance, had a very sudden new birth into Christianity. From heaven, Jesus spoke to him out loud, and Paul was blinded in the experience. (Paul did get his sight back, but that is another story.) Paul went on to become a very great missionary of the beginning Christian church.

Peter, on the other hand, one of Jesus original twelve disciples, came into the new birth of Christian faith over time. Peter became a great leader in the church.

Both ways are fine. God knows exactly how to deal with each person.

But back to Nicodemus’ lesson from Jesus. Jesus was also confirming Nicodemus’ statement that he, Jesus, must have come from God.

That may sound odd to us, because we know that Jesus did come from God, to be our Savior. Still, it was a new idea to Nicodemus. And he certainly was not expecting the Crucifixion to be part of it all.

“Jesus descended from heaven to bring eternal life (that is, participation in God’s life) through being lifted up on the cross.” (Oxford Annotated New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.)

Eternal life in heaven, defined as participation in God’s life, is an important concept for us to get. It does not mean living forever in this world, in the human life of sins and errors, good days and bad, getting older and feebler as the ages continue. That does not even sound good, much less heavenly.

No, eternal life with God begins with our Christian faith, in this human life on earth, and it continues in heaven, after death. This life in heaven is perfect and beyond beautiful. “The deepest peace on earth is only a shadow of the ultimate peace which is to come.” (Barclay)

Towards the end of this lesson with Jesus, we get to one of the most beloved Bible verses ever. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” That is how I learned it, in the King James Version. Let’s say that, all together. See. We know it!

God’s purpose in sending Jesus is to save us (Oxford.) That is important. Jesus didn’t have to talk God into it, or change God’s attitude about people (Barclay)

Oh, no, salvation was God’s purpose all along. And God’s motivation is love for the world, the universe even.

That is big. That is a huge, enormous bunch of love. As one book put it, “God is the Father who cannot be happy until his wandering children come home. God does not smash [people] into submission; [God] yearns over them and woos them into love.” (Barclay)

Well, it is hard to say exactly what Nicodemus got from this night-school class with Jesus. But later, Nicodemus did some things for Jesus. He said that Jesus should be given a fair trial, not just condemned out of hand. It was Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, who made the funeral arrangements for Jesus. The verse of John 19: 30 says “Nicodemus who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about one hundred pounds,” for a proper burial. Sounds like something must have sunk in, for Nicodemus.

So, that was Nicodemus' individual night school class with Jesus. And, we have benefited from it, as well, and even more, because we CLAIM Jesus as our Lord and we CLAIM Jesus as our Savior. He is, and we believe. Amen.

Preached by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters, March 8, 2020.