

3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. **6** That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.**7** Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' **8** The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? **11** Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. **12** If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? **13** No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. **14** And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Target audience for today's sermon: ** People who worry a lot

** People who are dissatisfied and grumpy a lot of time

** People who would like to know a peace that is not determined by the ups and down of life's circumstances

Here's a problem that I must tell you about right up front: you may have a hard time wrapping your head around today's sermon – just like Nicodemus had a hard time wrapping his head around what Jesus told him.

You must be born again in order to experience the Kingdom of God aka Kingdom of Heaven.

Most of us have grown up being told what that means: some version of ***If you want to be saved and go to heaven when you die, then you must ... "get fixed" in some way; confess some kind of faith statement.***

And people who have been brought up in the Church today will have just as hard a time understanding a different understanding of ***being born again*** as Nicodemus did.

But – difficult or not – here is a short simple statement of the problem, as well as the implied solution. I’m going to state it. Then I want you to repeat it aloud with me. And then I will attempt to explain what it means – using the words of Jesus in the Bible, and some everyday real life experiences. Here it is:

WE FOCUS TOO MUCH ON THE PRODUCT INSTEAD OF THE PROCESS. {Please repeat it with me.}

“If you were to die tonight, do you know where you would spend eternity?”

That is a typical religious understanding of what “being born again” is all about. And it FOCUSES ON THE PRODUCT (where you go after death) instead of the process.

Now if that is YOUR understanding of what “being born again” is all about AND if (a) you don’t worry, (b) you are neither dissatisfied or gumpy, and (c) you know a daily peace that is not determined by the circumstances of daily life – well, then, you just go right ahead and focus on that question: “Do you know where you’d spend eternity if you died tonight.” You don’t need to listen to the rest of this sermon. But if you’re still with me, here we go:

Two weeks ago (on Ascension Sunday) my whole sermon was about the teaching of Jesus: ***The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.***

Here's the very condensed version of that sermon: Jesus' whole life and ministry were focused on "***The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.***" It is about LIFE IN THE NOW and NOT so much on life after death.

- The Sermon on the Mount: don't worry about tomorrow; consider the lilies of the field-how they neither reap nor sow. But God takes care of them.
- The Lord's Prayer: Give us TODAY our daily bread.
- To Nicodemus: Don't give me a 5 or 10 year plan of action. Those who are "born again" are like the wind; you don't know where they come from, nor where they are headed.

These are just a few of the examples. Time doesn't allow me to go into all of Jesus' teachings on this. I invite you to do what I'm doing: read all four Gospels straight through and underline just how many times Jesus talks about:

- **LIVE IN THE MOMENT.**
- **IT'S ABOUT THE PROCESS, NOT SO MUCH THE PRODUCT.**

In his excellent book "The Practicing Mind," piano tuner and deep thinker Thomas M. Sterner discusses the ***difference between American and Asian competitive archery ...***

When I was in high school, I really wanted to get contact lenses. In that day, the doctor appointment cost \$25, and each contact lens cost \$25, for a total of \$75. Like my sister before me, who also wanted contact lenses, our parents told us we could have them, if we earned the whole \$75 ourselves.

I can't tell you a whole lot about those contact lenses; not nearly so much as I can tell you about working a summer job at the concession

stand at the swimming pool and saving all of my earnings, instead of buying the things my friends were buying, in order to save that money for the contact lenses. The process of getting them is much more memorable than the actual lenses. You better believe that after working that whole summer, I also was very careful about taking care of those lenses, and not losing them.

That story is the opposite of today's **credit-card-driven-instant gratification society**, in which the PRODUCT is the most important thing, and in which the PRODUCT satisfies our desires for much less time than it takes to pay the credit card bill.

There is a process called **BEGINNER'S MIND**. Let me define by illustration: Do you remember what it was like when you first learned how to drive a car? All of the things you had to remember, and all the things that you had to concentrate on at the very same time. That was BEGINNER'S MIND. It fully involved you. Now, however, when you get into the car and do things automatically without even thinking, and do so many other things as well: listen to radio or CD or MPS, talk on the phone (hands-free, of course), and talk to the people in the car. It's ALMOST (but not quite) IMPOSSIBLE to return to the same minds set of concentration you had when you began to learn how to drive.

But it is the accomplishment of that **BEGINNER'S MIND FOCUS/ATTENTION** that is necessary in life in order to experience the KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

Three times in Matthew, Jesus said: **In order to experience the Kingdom of Heaven, you must be like a child, aka Beginner's Mind.**

Here's the ZIPPER I used, and gave each of you present in worship 2 weeks ago, to illustrate: THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND. Jesus spent His whole life and ministry showing how to combine (1) the world of five senses/teeth on one side of the zipper and (2) the Kingdom of Heaven/teeth on the other side of the zipper.

And the only way that happens is to LIVE IN THE MOMENT.

To pay attention to the world around you with the same attention as BEGINNER'S MIND.

When you LIVE IN THE MOMENT like that, you can be like **Jesus** who asked (in the middle of a crowd) who touched my robe – when **He felt the power leave Him when the woman with the bleeding disease touched His robe.**

- **We all want to be saved.**
- **We all want to experience the Kingdom of Heaven.**
- **But if we focus on the PRODUCT instead of the PROCESS, then we miss the boat.**

I warned you up front that this was going to be hard for you to accept. But I will also tell you this:

- If you want to know the Peace of Christ, which passes all understanding
- If you want to experience the power of the Kingdom of Heaven that really is at hand
- If you want to live a life that is like Jesus did (zipper pulling together the two kingdoms, of five senses and of the kingdom of heaven)

Then you have to LIVE IN THE MOMENT and pay attention to what is happening with BEGINNER'S MIND.

SLOW DOWN. No good thing happens by moving fast, except getting out of the way of a grand piano falling from the sky. And that doesn't happen very often. **SLOW DOWN and PAY ATTENTION.**

If you are a cerebral person – want to be convinced in your head before you attempt the process, go through the four Gospels and read to see just how much Jesus' teaching are all about this, and *how very, very, very little Jesus talks about what happens to you after you die.*

If you are more experientially based, than cerebrally driven, then begin like this:

TOOTHBRUSH. Spend two minutes at the beginning of every day – TWO FULL MINUTES – brushing your teeth with BEGINNER'S MIND. Not only will you fulfill the recommendations of the American Dental Association, but you will also set the tone for how to go through your daily life.

Nicodemus had a hard time accepting all of this. But, we find out by the end of John's Gospel that he did GET IT. He came out of the closet, into the open, in his relationship with Jesus. He showed this by doing the very ordinary, in the moment, taking care of the burial of the crucified Jesus.

You may not buy any of what I have told you either.

But you may be hungry enough for peace and meaning in your daily life that is not being satisfied by traditional PRODUCT BASED religion and living. If so, you may just be willing to try.

It takes more than a toothbrush, but that's a good start. **And then, if you'd like to learn more, I invite you to contact me and we will walk this path together.**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.