

## DO YOU WANT TO BE BORN AGAIN?

The Rev. J. Donald Waring  
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*Nicodemus said to Jesus, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" (John 3:4)*

This week as I've puzzled over Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to Jesus by night, the strangest thought kept running through my mind. I was remembering a popular European Rhythm and Blues duo from the late 1980s, early 90s era. Their names were Fabrice Morvan and Rob Pilatus, and they became instant celebrities with the release of their first album, "*Girl You Know It's True*." They followed up on their early success with the hit singles, "*Blame It On The Rain*," and "*Baby Don't Forget My Number*." In 1990 they won a Grammy Award for "Best New Artist," and in a Time Magazine interview, Pilatus was quoted to say, "Musically, we're more talented than any Bob Dylan or Paul McCartney. Mick Jagger can't produce a sound. I'm the new Elvis."

The trouble started at a live concert in Connecticut, when a recording of the song they were supposed to be singing stuck and kept repeating a partial phrase. Not knowing what to do, Morvan and Pilatus eventually fled the stage. Then people began noticing that the halting English and thick European accents with which they spoke did not match the voices with which they sang. The pressure mounted, and soon the truth came out. The whole act was a hoax. Morvan and Pilatus had never sang a note on the recordings of their chart-topping hits. They were imposters. They were lip-syncing. The name of the band? *Milli Vanilli*, of course. "Milli Vanilli" is a name that will live in infamy, at least for the foreseeable future. It is synonymous with any act in any field that is fraudulent, inauthentic, not the real deal.

Why on earth would the lip-syncing "Milli Vanilli" and Nicodemus the Pharisee occupy my thoughts at the same time? By all accounts Nicodemus was anything but a fraud. He was the real deal. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was a member of a party within Judaism that concentrated on following the Law of Moses to the last letter. Not only did the Pharisees follow the Commandments themselves, they worked laboriously to interpret the Law so that all Jews, in every conceivable circumstance, would know exactly what to do. So no doubt about it: Nicodemus was a Grammy Award winning Commandment follower, which would have made him the life of any party back in those good-old Bible days. He would be admired and respected. He might not go so far as to call himself the new Moses. But morally, he certainly suspected that he was more talented than most others who tried to stand worthy before God. We can imagine his participating in today's Penitential Order, with the recitation of the Commandments. In Rite Two services, instead of responding, "Amen. Lord, have mercy," he would have sung: "Amen. Lord, I got this." The Rite One language would be too difficult to amend on the spot, so he might simply have sung, on our behalf: "Lord, have mercy upon *them*, and incline *their* hearts to keep this law." The point is, what you saw in Nicodemus was what you were supposed to get: someone with the Commandments not only on his lips, but also in his heart.

We have no reason to believe that Nicodemus was an imposter or a fraud, speaking the Commandments but not even attempting to follow them. But still, something wasn't right. John reports that Nicodemus came to Jesus under cover of night, having recognized that Jesus brought something to the faith and practice of Israel that he lacked. What did Nicodemus lack? We can only speculate, but perhaps we can find a clue in his opening remark to Jesus: "*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.*" What Nicodemus lacked was an awareness of *the presence of God*. He saw in Jesus something that all of his studying and following of the Commandments had failed

to produce in himself: a lively awareness of God's living presence. So in despair, perhaps in disarray, Nicodemus came to Jesus seeking direction. There he was, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, occupying one of the most prominent seats among his people, and for the first time he dared consider a frightening possibility: he was an imposter. He was lip-syncing the faith. The conversation that followed is among the most familiar in all of the Bible. In short, what Jesus told Nicodemus was that he needed to be born again, or born anew, or born from above. Biblical commentators tell us that the best translation of the Greek here should go something like this: *born from above, again*. No one enters the kingdom of God without being born from above, again.

What does it mean to be born again? It means different things to different people, I suspect. It's one of those phrases about which many people have already formed their opinions. Many shy away from the whole idea because it's been politically hijacked, or used by pushy evangelists to judge who is a true believer and who isn't. We should do our best to recover the phrase, because with it, Jesus holds out to Nicodemus and to us the gift of experiencing and enjoying God. To be born again is to fall in love with God. It is to trust that God loves the world so much that he sent Jesus not to condemn it, but to save it. It is to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is to know, as St. Paul would later say, that nothing in all of creation can separate you from the love of God. It is to be given what John calls eternal life, which says as much about quality of life as it does about quantity.

How does it happen? *How can anyone be born after having grown old?* Nicodemus wants to know, and so do we. Must it be a sudden, dramatic outpouring of the Spirit, or can it be a gradual awakening? Either way, we'd like to know, because until we taste of such an experience, even if it's just a sample, our fear is that something is fraudulent or inauthentic about our faith. Without a palpable experience of God, we're just going through the motions, lip-syncing to somebody else's soundtrack. We say the prayers and the creeds with our lips, but the words are not inscribed on our hearts. And the hymns? Oh my! The lack of the big organ today is exposing the Milli Vanilli in all of us.<sup>1</sup> Processing into the church to the tiny sound of the chamber organ was as if you had fled your pews! I don't mean to be harsh, but with the strong accompaniment supporting us removed, we hardly produced a sound. We fear that we are not the real deal, the genuine item.

Behold, a parable: a really silly parable, but a parable nonetheless. The kingdom of heaven is as if you went searching for it, but didn't know where to look. You see that in town a restaurant is named Burger Heaven, so you conclude that perhaps beautiful, juicy, pure-beef burger patties are the way to experience a bit of heaven on earth. Therefore, you decide to become a connoisseur of burgers in New York City. You go online and find reviews of the best burgers in town. You study them, and dig further into the ingredients that each establishment uses. You learn the nutritional value and calorie count and prices of every offering on every menu at burger joints across the city. You know exactly what the difference is between a Triple Shack Burger at Shake Shack and a Dave's Triple at Wendy's.

Now suppose that people learn of your expertise and begin to seek out your recommendations. You respond from the vast treasure of knowledge you've stored up in your head, saying, "There is a review that claims this one is better than that one." Or, "it is written: at this place you will wait in line for a long time. The burger will be expensive, and it has 1,300 calories in it." If it's Lent you may add, "Do you really want to ingest 1,300 calories in one sitting?" People will thank you for your wise and studious opinions, if not your unsolicited advice. But you know a secret that they don't: you're a fraud. Why? Because all you've ever done is read and study the reviews. One thing you lack: tasting the burgers yourself. You know all about them, but you don't know them. You haven't experienced them. Thus, you are a teacher of burgers, but you don't understand these things. Indeed, the kingdom of heaven is like a bacon double cheeseburger, but you can't just read about it. You have to taste and see how gracious the Lord is. I'm being silly here only to illustrate a point: that Nicodemus had spent a lifetime studying God

and parsing the Commandments, but somehow experiencing the presence of the true and living God had eluded him. It is just such a gift that Jesus wants to offer him, and us.

Do you want to be born anew? Do you want authentic faith? The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is dense and has many levels of meaning, but I believe we can learn much from it. It could be that what Nicodemus hoped to gain from the conversation was a recipe for the experience, or a list of instructions he could follow to conjure up the presence of God, or a page of sheet music that would allow him to sing the songs of Zion. What Jesus had to say possibly disappointed him. *The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.* In other words, you cannot control the presence of God, so stop pressing. In today's reading from Romans, St. Paul implies that such pressing for God's presence and favor is an attempt at justification by works. It is not by our own efforts that we are saved, or made aware of God's presence. It is a free gift. It depends on faith in order that the promise may rest on grace. It comes from above and is beyond our control, so stop pressing. Relax. Have faith. It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Something else we can glean from the conversation derives from all the imagery about birth. In order to receive the new life that Jesus has to give, it will be necessary to let go of the old life. For any baby to be born it must leave the only world it has ever known, the snug little confines of its mother's womb. To be sure, the womb is good, and it prepares the baby for the dazzling world of light and sound it's about to enter. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. We can see a birth process at work in Nicodemus, hard as it was for him. No doubt he'd been steeped in the faith and traditions of Israel since before he could remember. He was not only a Pharisee but a leader of the Jews. It was the only world he knew. Much has been written about why Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, under cover of darkness. Some conclude it was because he wasn't entirely ready to let go and come out into the light. We can't blame him. Birth is hard work. Conversion is a process.

Indeed, we do not condemn Nicodemus for taking his own time. In fact, we commend him for stepping out in faith. Once he'd encountered the Spirit of God freshly alive and powerfully at work in Jesus, he knew that simply doing the same old thing, and sitting in his same old seat wouldn't work anymore. He risked. He tried something new. Whatever became of him? Was his conversion ever complete? Of course it wasn't, because God is never finished with any of us, no matter how many times we've been born. We only hear two more brief references to Nicodemus in the New Testament, both in the Gospel of John. In John 7 we read how Nicodemus argued with some chief priests of the Temple who wanted to condemn Jesus. He urged them to go see for themselves the work that he was doing. Then in John 19 we read that it was Nicodemus who at the death of Jesus, brought myrrh and aloes that were necessary for the burial. After this he fades into history. Was he all in with Jesus, or only partially so? We'll never know, but at least on three occasions he stepped out in faith to sing his own song.

This week I read a thing of great irony about the band, Milli Vanilli. It seems that in the midst of the scandal, when they were being exposed as frauds, they gave a press conference and someone asked them to sing one of their songs. They did so, a capella. A voice coach was present in the audience, and his determination was that they sounded better than the two men whose recorded voices they'd lip-synced.<sup>2</sup> How sad, that when it really mattered, they had been unable to step out in faith, and sing their own song.

Do you want to be born again? Do you want to experience the presence of the living God? Relax, let go, and step out in faith. Taste and see how gracious the Lord is. Trust that God loves the world – and you – so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.

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<sup>1</sup> The Grace Church organ is temporarily shut down to protect it from the dust of ceiling restoration.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.crapfromthepast.com/millivanilli/overview.htm>