

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Nicodemus: Darn Tootin’”

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John 3:3-4

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We continue today our series looking at questions of faith, doubt, and growth, and if you were with us last week when we started, you'll remember we're walking along a man named Nicodemus, who really appears only in one chapter in the Bible, John chapter 3, aside from popping up quickly in two other spots, which we'll get to.

But in this third chapter, a back and forth between Nicodemus and Jesus, we find Nicodemus, this Pharisee, this leader among the people, coming to Jesus by night, wanting to know more. But then Jesus says something Nicodemus didn't expect or understand. Let's go to God's Word together. John 3:3-4.

*Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”
“What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?”*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

God of Truth, we praise you for in your glory you reveal yourself in ways beyond our comprehension, and yet we cannot deny how you have shown yourself. We come to you by night; we come to you with questions; we come to you with doubt; and by grace you receive us. Bless us this day by your Word, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

If you find yourself watching an old Western, and I mean black and white old Westerns, and say one cowboy said to another cowboy, “Gonna have to skedaddle ‘fore the storm hits and the river rises,” the other cowboy would respond, “You’re right,” but maybe wouldn’t say it that way. It’d be more like “Darn tootin’.” You know, that old Western saying. You agree with something? Or you want to affirm what somebody said or did, you say, “Darn tootin’.”

I dare say we don’t really use that phrase all that often, not unless we’re trying to sound like we’re in an old Western. But I never actually thought about the phrase and what it means until this week.

Honestly I couldn’t tell you whether it’s actually an old Western saying, or whether it got used in old movies. But regardless, best I could tell is that that “darn” part, as you’d probably guess, is a softer version of another word, and the “tootin’” part, is some reference to what someone is saying, that is, the very act of speaking, blowing or tooting your horn. So, if someone is speaking the truth and you want to affirm as much, “Darn tootin’.” (Shows you what a surreal job I have sometimes, this week spending more time than you would think exploring “Darn tootin’.) And I believe that there is a place for “Darn tootin’” in the couple of verses we read today.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, in secret, and recognizes him as a teacher, a Rabbi, saying to him, “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.” We talked last week about the reasons Nicodemus probably had to be secretive and yet the undeniable pull he sensed toward Jesus that led him to come to him in the first place.

And Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” If you’re tracking along, just in terms of normal exchange of pleasantries, one typically doesn’t lead with something like that, but so it goes with Jesus.

The stakes are high with these words. One cannot see the kingdom of God, the reality of God, the reign of God unfolding within creation, you can’t even see it, unless...you are born from above. Kind of a puzzling phrase when you think about it. Nicodemus thought about it, and he was puzzled. He responds to Jesus with a question, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” It doesn’t make sense.

But Christ’s claim here remains, and the stakes are high. You cannot, will not see the kingdom of God unless and until you have been born from above, or born anew, or born again. (By the way, if you’ve ever heard the phrase, “being born again,” or “born again Christian,” this is where that comes from.) And it’s a powerful thought, rebirth. Rebirth in such a way that you see the world in an entirely new way, God’s way. You are born into a reality that sees things through the lens of the kingdom of God, not any other one.

It’s the how that raises questions. How does one become born from above, or born again? If the second birth is anything like the first birth, I don’t remember having much say in the matter, so what exactly is going on?

Jesus will go on to elaborate, but as we’ll see next week it may not clear things up for Nicodemus so much.

What I’ve been thinking about is the way Jesus started talking with Nicodemus. In the version we read, it said, “Very truly, I tell you.” In other translations, it might have had it as “Truly, truly,” or if you’re going with an old King James Version, it has, “Verily, verily.” What they’re all trying to translate is a word, or rather a pair of words, that you’re probably familiar with. In fact, you’ve heard it a few times already just this morning.

It’s “Amen. Amen.” Those are the two words rendered as “Very truly,” or “Truly, truly,” or “Verily, verily.” And once you know “Amen” is at the beginning of what Jesus says, you might think, “That’s an odd way to start a sentence. I thought you only used that at the end of things like prayers and what not.” And you’d have good reason to think that. “Amen” is a common ending to a prayer, and even in Scripture, you’ll find it tagged onto the end of an especially powerful prayer or passage.

But while we might think “Amen” is this liturgical word meant to wrap up prayers, really it just meant, “Truth” or “True” or “Trustworthy.” So when people would use it at the end of things like prayers or songs, it was just a way of affirming the truth of what had just been said. It’s a lot like how we would use phrases like “Right on,” “Alright,” or if you’re trying to sound like the Old West, “Darn tootin’.”

And when Jesus says “Amen” twice in a row like he does here, it just emphasizes it. “Truly, truly.” I mean if he did it three times, he’ll be sounding like Matthew McConaughey, “Alright, alright, alright.”

Not suggesting we start ending any prayers with “Darn tootin’”, though. Might be a bit much and a tad irreverent to say, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Darn tootin’.” But you get the idea. The message is the same. It’s affirming the truth, the trustworthiness of what’s being said.

Question is, what is Jesus doing putting it at the beginning of what he says to Nicodemus?

On one hand, it was a common enough formulation for “Amen” to come at the beginning of a sentence. That structure of “Truly I say unto you,” happens from time to time, and “Amen” is there at the beginning. Nothing out of the ordinary.

But I wonder, with Jesus saying, “Truly, truly,” “Amen, Amen,” whether he’s got more than one thing in mind. That is, not just what he was about to say, but also what had just been said, and even the person saying it.

Nicodemus had come to Jesus, had recognized him as a teacher, as having come from God. He came by night; he came with doubts; he came with questions; but still he came. And even after Jesus would speak, it’s not like the questions stopped. If anything, they multiplied, and Nicodemus kept asking them.

And yet to this sheepish, secretive man of doubt and conflict who bravely came nonetheless, Jesus’ first words were, “Truth. Truth.” It’s as if Christ recognizes in him the bravery to seek him even when it was risky to do so, recognizes in him the sincerity of faith even in the questions he asks of it, recognizes in him the conviction to see God at work even in ways he couldn’t fully understand. Christ recognizes all of this, and upon hearing this man’s quivering, secretive voice in the darkness, he says, “Right on,” “Amen,” “Darn tootin’.”

I remember years ago as my own sense of faith and my own sense of calling into ministry was being shaped coming to a mentor of mine, seemingly over and over, with questions about Scripture, about theology, about practice, you name it. I do wonder sometimes just what he must have thought after the umpteenth time I would meet with him or email him or talk with him on the phone. But never indicated any impatience or frustration with me.

In fact, I remember at one point bringing up some pretty big questions, about good and evil and God’s purposes for the world, and sharing my own frustration that I couldn’t quite get my head around it. What did this mean for me? Was my faith sincere? Did I belong in ministry?

And to that, this blessed voice of guidance in my life said simply, “Keep doing what you’re doing.” Keep grappling with it, he meant. Keep struggling. Keep up with the questions. Keep up with the doubt. Keep up with the things that keep you up at night. “Keep doing what you’re doing,” he said. I noticed later, he didn’t exactly answer my questions, or at least not in ways that I could or would understand, but he said, “Keep doing what you’re doing.”

The walk we see Nicodemus on, a walk of faith, a walk of doubt, has no shortage of questions along the way. And even after the narrative leaves Nicodemus, who knows what walk he continues?

He’s got fair questions, mind you. Being “born again,” “born from above,” that’s not exactly a phrase you just accept blindly when you hear for the first time, especially when the stakes are nothing short of seeing the very kingdom of God.

But before any questions get asked, and certainly before any questions get answered, Jesus simply affirms this man’s faith just in the seeking, of arriving at the door that night, recognizing something he couldn’t fully understand. And Jesus tells him, “Right on. Amen. Keep doing what you’re doing.”

There’s a challenge in being born again. It’s not something easily understood. After all, how much did you understand your first birth when you were going through it? Not at all. You don’t even remember how your eyes opened for the first time and drew that first new breath. There’s a challenge in entering that same place of faith to be born again, helpless.

And yet there's something hopeful about it. For despite any leanings or misgivings we might have, there's this invitation that no matter what has gone before, there is a new birth waiting too, a new birth with new eyes to see the world in a new way, God's way, the way Christ is ushering in.

Maybe you've felt that challenge, that invitation. Maybe you've felt the questions and doubts gnaw at your soul, and it makes you wonder whether you were even cut out for something like faith or Jesus or God or church or whatever combination you want to put together, you wonder whether it was something you could at all be a part of. But still there's something undeniable about him that keeps pulling you back, out of curiosity, out of fascination, out of something you can't quite explain.

It's not like the questions disappeared for you. If anything they've multiplied. It's not like the doubts have been dispelled either, you might feel.

But maybe today Christ is saying to you, in the same way he said to this Nicodemus long ago, recognizing in you a sincerity of curiosity, of intrigue, and before anything else is said, affirming to you, "Amen. Right on. Keep doing what you're doing."

So bring your doubt, bring your curiosity, bring what questions gnaw at your soul, and know that they will be met by one who affirms the faithfulness in your seeking.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Darn tootin'.