

Water and Spirit are life (John 3:1-17)

Why does Jesus tie these two things together?

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When Nicodemus visits Jesus, he is trying to figure out his place in the world. Who is this teacher, Jesus? What has God sent him to do?

Nicodemus is a religious leader, and he recognizes in Jesus someone deeply faithful--“a teacher who has come from God”--but also incredibly novel. Jesus seems to operate by a set of rules that Nicodemus does not recognize. So Nicodemus asks him: what is your point, Jesus? What are you doing here?

“No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit,” Jesus tells him. Why does he tie these two things together?

Here's a hint: it's not so we can have nice, safe ceremonies with a nice, safe bowl of water from the tap safely inside a nice building's walls. It's because water is life, and Spirit is life, and both are holy gifts from an awesome God. Until we wake up to this, we are dead inside. We must be born again--through water and the Spirit--to be alive at all.

What Jesus asks of us is to become truly alive: to be born from above. This is hard for Nicodemus, and it's hard for us. After all, as religious leaders--lay and ordained--we are accustomed to our traditions and to the expectations of our elders. We forget that water is treasure for a thirsty soul. We put it in a font, sprinkle a few drops, and are done with the ceremony of the day. It is easy to miss the point about our true place in creation.

Water flows across our planet and in our veins. All life depends on it. Water wakes us up to our radical reliance on that which we can neither tame nor control. We forget this at our peril.

Christ's coming demonstrates the love of God, as wild as water. This love does not fit neatly into human ceremonies and expectations; it bursts past even death and the tomb. In it, all creation is included.

"For God so loved the world..." is easy to say but hard to live. If God loves the world, then every drop of water matters--and every human soul. If God loves the world, we who love God are called to love the world as well.

My place in creation is not too far from Nicodemus's, though 2,000 years separate us. Like him, I depend on water and Spirit for life. Like him, I seek to learn from Jesus. Like him, I steward traditions without always waking up to their meaning.

But because Jesus came, putting flesh on the immortal triune God, I see my place in the world more clearly. I am here to be a servant of the creator. Like Jesus, I am sent to love.