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SERMON TITLE: Who's Invited, Walking as Disciples of Jesus Series
SCRIPTURE: John 3:1-17
DATE: February 9, 2020
Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

Read also Jeremiah 46:25-28 Check out the service at www.fpcd.org

I was raised in a Presbyterian Church. My mother took my brother and me to church every Sunday. What I remember about it was going bowling afterward. Every week we got to eat lunch at the bowling alley. I remember Sunday School where the boys sat on one side of the room and girls on the other. I remember singing in a children's choir and getting corrected for singing "Lord" instead of "laud." Laud was not in my vocabulary; I had no idea what it meant.

That was church to me—going there so you could go to the bowling alley. I had to sit on the right side, sing the right words, and be quiet during the worship service, which I can't remember except my mother's pinch to keep me quiet. It was our weekly church practice and there were expectations and benefits.

The Israelites lost their weekly church benefit when they were exiled to a foreign land and their temple was destroyed. But Jeremiah told them *you will not be lost; you will not be negated; there is purpose in this.*

This was actually a prophecy. God's people were exiled to live in foreign cities and have faith that God had a purpose in it. It was a foreshadowing of the future when Jewish believers—Jesus' disciples—would later travel Roman roads to these towns and visit their synagogues to share the gospel. They became the catalyst that would bring the good news to other nations, including those nations which had once exiled them. Even Jeremiah's name meant "Prophet to the Nations" (Jer 1:5).

Our God is God of all nations, not just a local deity; a good-luck charm, concerned only with a particular culture, time, or place. God is a huge God; powerful; able to rule the entire world; and God's blessings are for all the families of the earth.

But how do we get beyond thinking simply of our church, our time, and our own agenda? Eugene Peterson says,

"Religions that we make up for ourselves always reduce reality to what we feel comfortable with. . . . We feel secure when we are with cronies who talk our language and sing our songs and don't rock the boat. . . . It is safe." He adds, "The larger the world, the less we can subject to our own control."¹

But perhaps it is also hard for us to see God as so big, so almighty, so involved and so caring for all people that we limit ourselves to our own deal. T.S. Eliot says, "Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go."

But Jesus had a much bigger, much broader view of the life of faith. Jesus knows exactly how to expand your view to a God who is actually huge, powerful, and able to rule the entire world and desires to bless it. It began one night with a session member—an elder at the temple. Jessica Kusler come tell the story. (If you are reading this, stop and read the Scripture here: John 3:1-13)

Nicodemus would have been highly respected as religious. But Nicodemus had many questions. He was "in the dark." That becomes evident as he asks Jesus his questions. Most of us have questions to ask Jesus.

Jesus willingly answers our questions, just like he answered Nicodemus. Are you asking your questions? Church should be open to people asking questions because Jesus was ready to listen. But be prepared for real, challenging conversation!

Jesus talks about birth and the kingdom of God. This kingdom is all around us but you can't judge how people fit in by their presence at church or their goodness or failures, like Nicodemus was used to.

There's a difference, Jesus said.

As a child, because of my mother's responsible intention, I was religious. But by the time I was a teenager, I was, according to Jesus, in the darkness.

You could have said to me—if you want to enter the Kingdom of God you need to be born again, and I would have said, "Say what?? What are you talking about?"

Jesus opens the door to shed light on a new place, a new journey. He describes it as being "born again, from above."

Born again is the language of the church now. In 2020 our entire nation has probably heard the term "born again." But what does it mean?

Here are some clues from our friend Nicodemus's story:

- Being a disciple of Jesus is not all your responsibility.

Your own will does not bring about your birth. Not at all! It is the will or actions of your parents alone. In like manner, being

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Run with the Horses*, p. 180.

born into God's family is an action of God; God's desire, intention, and love. God wants you included. That's what Jesus shows Nicodemus. In addition, Jesus is not limited to the church alone or one particular nation; Jesus does this all over the world.

Have you had a time in your life you just knew Jesus was there because he wanted to be? Jesus reaches out to you and helps you to see God is alive.

Often we think God loves us because we do stuff to please God.

C. S. Lewis was an atheist who decided to explore God. He disliked church and he wasn't seeking God personally. It was more intellectual—keeping God at a safe distance. He explains in *Surprised by Joy* how God trumped all that. He writes,

"You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen (College at Oxford), night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."²

Later, after hours with his friend J.R.R. Tolkien, who explained to him that not only must you believe in God but you must also accept Jesus his Son who actually enters the heart, Lewis wrote, *On the way to the zoo the next day I did not believe in Jesus, but on the way home, riding in the side car of my brother's motorcycle, suddenly I knew I believed with all my heart.*

It wasn't just his effort; suddenly the Holy Spirit had come to him.

That leads to our second observation:

➤ The Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. (Jn 3:6)

Jesus described the Spirit like the wind blowing wherever it wants. You can't explain it; you cannot control it. The wind is indiscriminate. It blows on good and bad alike. It blows on a well-developed town as well as a wide open field. It blows in the light and in the darkness. It blows whether you want it to or not. It comes up suddenly and dies down in like manner. It ruins everybody's hair.

You can't explain it.

It blows on the educated and the uneducated, the free and the imprisoned, the foreigner and your neighbor, the rich and the poor; children and old men; the blind and those who see. It has nothing to do with your goodness but with God's grace.

Do you accept God's grace today, or carry guilt or resistance because of your own good works or bad attitude, or your own limited vision that faith is only about church? I assure you, it is not.

Anne Lamott gives this testimony about church:

I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, 'I would rather die.' One week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or *something* was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me. I began to cry. . . . I raced home and . . . opened the door . . . stood there a minute . . . then I hung my head . . . took a long deep breath and said out loud, . . . 'All right. You can come in.'³

➤ The Holy Spirit comes in and bonds you to the Lord Jesus Christ, because he pursued and you said, "Okay, you can come in."

The Son of God came down from heaven to tell us these things.

It wasn't until age sixteen that a girl dragged to church by her mother was born into the kingdom by the wind of the Spirit when someone shared about Jesus. She was invited because:

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." ~ John 3:16

You and I have birth certificates which certify our genealogy in a certain time and place. However, the second birth certificate is the one that matters. This one connects us to this greater, more powerful and permanent genealogy, for

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." ~ John 3:17

You have been invited. How are your birth certificates looking?

AMEN

² C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 228-229.

³ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, 49-50.