

# What is Best?

Second Sunday of Lent, March 8, 2020

When we hear the loudest, and most popular, views of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus about his need to be "*born from above*" and not only "*born of flesh*" — we seldom hear that what Jesus is teaching Nicodemus about is the two great themes of "**The Promised Land**" and "**The Righteous**," who get to inhabit it. But human goodness, or righteousness — and the "place" we have to be in our lives to experience it — is actually what their conversation is all about.

To his credit, Nicodemus is a good Pharisee; of the bloodline of Abraham; a sincere follower & teacher of the Mosaic Law, to the best of his ability. And these merits make him a righteous man, who is entitled to inhabit The Promised Land. Nicodemus is quite clear about all of this, but as a good Pharisee, he knows that he could always be clearer. And he knows that the things Jesus has been saying & doing — although controversial — couldn't happen apart from the presence of God. So he goes to meet him at night... to see what he has to say about these great themes of "The Righteous" and their "Promised Land" (which Jesus usually calls "*The Kingdom of God*" or "*The Kingdom of Heaven.*")

The essential message Jesus conveys to Nicodemus is that there is not just **one**, but **two** key understandings of "The Righteous" and "The Promised Land." One is the "*garden variety*" understanding, and the other is the "*heavenly variety.*" Both are important to know. But, according to Jesus, Nicodemus has never gone beyond the "*garden variety*" understanding — which is what he practices, and teaches others to practice. Jesus doesn't lecture him about this, though. He teaches him by using an analogy from nature, about human birth.

And he doesn't waste any time. Right at the beginning of the conversation, he launches his "birth analogy" and cuts to the core assumptions of Nicodemus about "the righteous" and "the promised land."

Nicodemus obviously knows that he is a "created," "mortal," "finite" being, and that he came into this being by being "born" — by his mother giving birth to him. And so, counting on this, Jesus immediately turns him for a loop by telling him that he can't even "see" (much less "occupy") the Promised Land unless he has been "born from above."

Nicodemus hears the part about "*being born*," but the part about "*from above*" goes right over his head. And so, what he understands Jesus to be saying is that he must be physically born — "**again**" — which Nicodemus rightly says is impossible.

So Jesus repeats it in a different way, which if we fill in a few details, would sound like this:

*"You experienced the birth of 'water,' when your mother's amniotic fluid 'broke' and you came out, opened your eyes for the first time, saw the outer world around you, and felt its pains & pleasures — right? Well that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about another kind of experience altogether, something not physical but spiritual, something **like** a 'birth', but different — it happens when God's invisible Spirit opens 'the eyes of your heart' to see the real Promised Land, the Kingdom of God, which is also invisible, intangible, spiritual, not material — but is here now — within your midst, even within **you** — waiting to be entered & occupied. And the kind of righteousness that emerges from this spiritual place is the righteousness of God, the 'heavenly variety', the best kind — not the kind you know & practice & teach to others."*

Nicodemus is struggling to "**do the math**" on all of this, but he's getting even more confused than he was before. I imagine his inner thoughts must have been moving along something like this: *"Let's see... There's a place that's invisible..... but it's still really here..... it's around me & within me.... and it somehow becomes visible to me..... but not to my eyes.... and it somehow becomes inhabitable by me..... but not in a way I can touch with my hands..... and when I somehow get 'in' to this invisible, intangible place..... the righteousness of God somehow becomes my righteousness .... and I somehow ride like the wind (invisibly) into The Promised Land... which I'm actually... somehow... already in... "*

*Maybe Jesus should've started the conversation with "**Riddle me this, Nicodemus!**"*

In any case, it just doesn't "add up" for Nicodemus. So it doesn't take long before he just throws up his hands in frustration and asks Jesus — **"How can these things be?"** And Jesus must have thought that this was a good question to leave him to reflect on, because, at that point, he stops the lesson. But he does plant a final seed — a rhetorical question — in the mind of Nicodemus: *"How can you be a **Teacher** of Israel, if you yourself don't yet **understand** these things?"* (So he gives Nicodemus a lot of spiritual homework to take home that night.)

Our second reading, from Paul's letter to the Romans, makes what Jesus is getting at a bit clearer – because the message is the same – but Paul explains it in a different way. He starts by making the case that there are two different **kinds** of human goodness or "righteousness."

**The first kind** — what I've been calling the "garden variety" — is rooted in the deep **trust** we call "faith" — but it's a faith in myself alone. It's the kind of "goodness" that I make on my own — no one (*divine or otherwise*) gives it to me, or helps me make it — it is the "product" or "work" of my own two hands. And so, I alone "merit" (or deserve) the "credit" or "reward" — for this kind of goodness. Its "payoffs" are not a "gift." They are "owed" me. I've earned them, and I alone am entitled to get them. And if I **don't** get it, my wrath is also righteous.

**The second kind** of human goodness — what I've been calling the "*heavenly variety*" — is **not** created by me, myself alone. It's not a "do-it-yourself" kind of project. It is also rooted in the deep trust we call "faith." But in this kind of goodness, it's a **trust ...** in the One who is the **Ultimate** Good, the One whose love & wisdom reveal to me what good & evil, as such, really are. The One who "saves," "rescues," and "heals" me from false knowledge of good & evil — and empowers me to be good & do good — with a goodness that is, mysteriously, "**not my own.**" I merely become its vessel, through trusting in One who is *righteousness-itself*. And so, in **this** kind of human goodness, there is nothing I can "boast" about. God gets the glory — for it's God's righteousness that is manifesting through me, not my own. My "reward" is the humbling-but-awesome experience of being an empty vessel, an open channel for God's goodness to flow through into my everyday life (which is truly "Heaven on Earth," the "pearl of great price".)

It's only this second kind of "heavenly" human goodness that opens the eyes of our hearts to see, enter in, and occupy the invisible Kingdom of God, that is already here, in our midst. This all goes back to Abraham (from our first reading) — who trusts in God, not in himself alone, and God considers this trust to be the "heavenly variety" of human righteousness that leads to God's Promised Land. But, let's not be deceived about the goodness of Father Abraham. Many things that he did — which he himself considered to be highly faithful & righteous — were far from *the "heavenly variety."* Like when he pulls the "**she's not my wife — she's just my pretty sister**" scam, so that the Pharaoh will take his wife Sarah as his concubine, and in exchange, give Abraham a fortune. It works so well, he does it again with the King in Negeb, and gets even richer & more powerful. And he sees all this "loot" as God's reward for his righteousness. On a more massive scale, we'll remember the way that Abraham comes to understand God's Promised Land to be the physical, *and already-occupied*, territory of Canaan — so that a "holy war" will be required for God's promise to be fulfilled. It's an understanding that stills fuels violence in the Middle East today.

So if you're feeling now that your goodness is way too "garden variety" — at least it's not that bad! And I hope you'll be recognizing that you've experienced the "heavenly variety" of goodness more often than you imagined.

But at least "**in principle**", we're all really not that different from Abraham. We're all a "mixed bag." Our goodness is sometimes of the "garden variety," do-it-yourself kind — sometimes of the "heavenly variety", where we're inwardly surrendering to simply being God's channel. And often a mixture of the two in varying proportions. *It is very clear what kind of human goodness Jesus considers best.*

But, in the end, I think it's safe to say that his main concern for us is that we manifest as much of this "heavenly," "graced," "from above" kind of goodness as possible — so that our own lives, and our world, will become much better, happier places to live in.