

CARBONATED HOLINESS

Sermon, March 20, 2011

Texts: Genesis 12:1-6; John 3:1-17

As you may know, the New Testament tends to be rather hard on the Pharisees. However, that's not because they were bad people. In fact, the Pharisees tried really hard to be good people, and for the most part, they succeeded. They were so good, they had a really hard time understanding their need of a Savior. How do good people end up in conflict with Jesus Christ? Well, one way is by not appreciating our need of grace, grace that comes only from above.

Nicodemus is one Pharisee the New Testament portrays in a rather positive light. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin ... which means he was more than likely well educated, he was ethical, he was moral, he cared for the common people; he would have to do all that and more to rise to the Sanhedrin. But clearly this good man was searching for something more.

We're told in our gospel reading that one night Nicodemus leaves his home, and goes out in search of Jesus. When he finds Jesus, apparently, unlike the other Pharisees, he has no interest in debating politics, taxation, or matters of observing the Sabbath. Nicodemus just wants to talk to Him. Note he comes to Jesus in the night. The traditional interpretation is that Nicodemus doesn't want to be seen with Jesus, as Jesus was making a lot of Pharisees angry. But perhaps could it be Nicodemus goes to Jesus at night for the same reason we do? Like the Pharisee Nicodemus, we, too are trying our best to be good, to do the right thing. And at the end of the day, when we are exhausted by trying to be good, and when we're conflicted by all the things we've done that day that just aren't good enough, aren't we always more ready to talk to Jesus? It is at nighttime we fitfully toss and turn with the discouraging realization that being good doesn't really always seem to cut it; that in spite of our very best efforts there are still difficulties we continue to encounter. In the nighttime when that hits you, when all the joy just seems to be drained from your life, when you feel like you are a carbonated drink that has been left out open on the counter too long ... you're flat, your effervescence is gone ... that's when you are ready to have a conversation with Jesus. *"Jesus, I'm tired. I'm no saint, but I do try to fulfill my responsibilities. But there's always more to be done. There's always something left undone. There's always something happening that isn't right. There's always seems to be someone I've failed. Why do such things keep happening? Jesus, I need some help."* Yes, like Nicodemus, we know about nighttime conversations with Jesus.

I've pointed this out before, but note Nicodemus begins the conversation by complimenting Jesus. He calls him a rabbi, or teacher, One who has obviously come from God. He mentions he is impressed by the signs Jesus has performed. Complimenting is just one of the things that good people do; good people love to compliment each other. In doing so, they affirm the standards they live by as well; they affirm the standards by which good people live. Again, giving sincere compliments and affirming what is good is just another good thing that good people do.

Jesus replies to the compliment rather enigmatically, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Now, ONE word in the Greek is translated by the two words "born again;" the word *anōthen* is a word that carries a double meaning. The double meaning is both "born from above" and "born again." Bible translators typically choose one or the other of these interpretations and footnote the other; the choice usually demonstrates a theological disposition of the translator(s). We should look at the context to see which might better fit. If you think of it, being born is a rather passive process, at least for the one being born; the one being born has very, very little to do about it. Last month we celebrated the 14th and 19th birthdays of my two beloved daughters, and will celebrate the 17th birthday of my only-begotten son in April. Now, none of them *chose* to be born 19, 14 or 17 years ago. They certainly weren't born because they were responding to the obstetrician's altar call, "Ye Must Be Born!" They weren't coaxed and persuaded and convinced this was something they should do, so they made a decision and came forward out of the womb. No, birth was a gift of life they were *given* by someone who endured great sacrifice and a good deal of pain. Receiving life wasn't an act of their will, it was a gift given from "above." And I think Jesus is telling Nicodemus this gift of the Spirit of God is also a gift of life we receive "from above," it's a grace that comes from One who is about to endure great sacrifice and a good deal of pain to make this new life possible. Without that initiative of grace from above, there is just no coming alive to the wonderful realities of the Kingdom of God. It is purely grace from above, a gift of God's grace through His Spirit. Hold that thought.

Singer and writer Carolyn Arends writes about her three year old daughter who had the Sunday School assignment of cutting out and coloring pictures of children engaged in different acts of worship, and gluing them onto a sheet. Carolyn, the mother, asked her what act of worship each picture represented. As the mother pointed to each picture, little Bethany would shout out, *"That's Praying!" "Giving!" "Reading the Bible!"* One picture was of a boy with his mouth open wide, and little Bethany said, "That's my FAVORITE!" The mother, of course, expected little Bethany to say, "That's Singing!"; as singing was also Mom's favorite form of worship. But when Mom pointed to the picture and asked, "And what is this?" Bethany answered, "Laughing!" The mother wrote, *"I stood corrected. Laughing is my favorite form of worship, too."*

Laughter can be an act of worship, and is certainly appropriate in worship! Of course, we are talking about the good kind of laughter. There is also derisive laughter, rooted in pettiness or vulgarity or cruelty. It's not hard to tell the redemptive kind from the destructive kind.

Voltaire wrote: *"God is a comedian, playing to an audience too afraid to laugh."* I like that. Some of us have a hard time thinking of God as having humor. But take a good look at creation, and you see evidence of it. A quick example: Take the ostrich, with that ridiculously long neck, the awkward gait, each bugged-out eye bigger than the ostrich's brain ... I can just picture God in a playful mood while forming that funny looking creature, elongating that neck, enlarging the eyes, then afterwards taking a couple extra duck beaks and feet laying around and pasting them on a beaver and creating a platypus. Or take a look at some of the stories in the Bible. If we really look at some of the stories, we can come to no other conclusion than that God has a sense of humor. We read today of the beginning of Abrams' adventure with God. God said to him, *"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* That's an incredible, wonderful promise! The only problem is, God made that covenant with someone who was childless -- at age 75. And his wife Sarah is 65. Certainly it's a joke of some kind. Couldn't God have made a covenant with someone, say, 19? And it was 25 years later, Chapter 18, that angelic messengers came to Abraham's tent to say, *"That's right. Sarah's going to have a baby,"* Sarah was the only one who had an appropriate response to this. She heard what was said and she laughed! There she was, 90 years old, standing outside the tent laughing. Well, Sarah had that baby. And they named him Isaac. Do you know what "Isaac" means in Hebrew? It means "laughter."

Some other select quotes on laughter: Martin Luther-- *"If you are not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don't want to go there."* Julia Roberts -- *"Show me a person who doesn't like to laugh and I'll show you a person ready for a toe tag."* Woody Allen: *"I am thankful for laughter, except when milk comes out of my nose."* William James -- *"We don't laugh because we're happy - we're happy because we laugh."* Shirley MacLaine -- *"A person who knows how to laugh at himself will never cease to be amused."* Edgar Watson Howe -- *"If you don't learn to laugh at trouble, you won't have anything to laugh at when you're old."* Michael Pritchard -- *"You don't stop laughing because you grow old. You grow old because you stop laughing."* Mary Pettibone Poole -- *"He who laughs, lasts!"* According to a 1985 Parade Magazine poll, *"The number one reason for choosing a mate is the ability to laugh together."* A Japanese Proverb -- *"Time spent laughing is time spent with the gods."* And my favorite is from Karl Barth, which brings us back and ties in with Jesus' talk with Nicodemus about grace from above: *"Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God."*

"Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God." Think of laughter as a kind of carbonation. Just as carbon dioxide injects itself into regular water and makes it effervescent, bubbling over, alive and just ready to burst its containers, so does joyous humor inject itself into our regular lives and causes us to burst out, bubble over, come alive and laugh; laughter elevates our spirits. On a much larger scale, this is exactly what the Spirit of God does! The Spirit of God comes from above and injects Himself by grace into our souls to bring life, life born of the Spirit, full and abundant and effervescent life that bubbles over with joy, hope and love. Jesus goes on to tell Nicodemus this Spirit is like the wind. It's interesting that we talk about "gales" of laughter. We instinctively recognize that laughter, too, almost belongs to the world of wind ... unexpected joy arrives on the gust of a fresh current and carries us to a different place from where it found us. A good laugh carries us away, even if only for a moment, from worry, strife, and self. Ann Lamott writes that laughter is part of the life of God, and that to laugh from your belly really can be an act of worship to the Giver of all good gifts. Carolyn Arends calls it (*and I love this term*) a kind of **carbonated holiness**,

If I've learned nothing else in my years of ministry, I've learned this: We will never understand God until we get it through our heads that the God we worship is the most joyous Being in the universe. God did not create the world in order to judge it, or in order to dominate it, or in order to make it obey the dictates of His will. God made the world to delight in it, He made this world and all that is in it to share in His overflowing joy and love; and He delights when we discover the delight of His good ways. Elsewhere in the Bible, God refers to Himself as a husband to His people ... well, He certainly is not some domineering control freak of a husband who neurotically *needs* to be loved, who constantly demands proof of love and loyalty because of His insecurities. No, God is a secure lover Who wishes to share His joy, who wishes to lavish love *on* and share blessings *with* His beloved. **Joy** is of the essence of God's character, and joy is, ultimately, the eternal destiny of this universe He created.

Of course, God knows sorrow, too. He also knows anger; the Bible is clear on that. But God is not fundamentally angry! Nor is He fundamentally sorrowful, touchy, broodingly melancholy and joyless. The sorrow of God, the anger of God, these are only temporary responses to situations in a fallen world; I'm convinced He expresses sorrow and anger toward sin primarily because of the misery it brings to us, His beloved! And the causes for His sorrow and anger will one day be banished forever through His redemptive activity. As author C. S. Lewis put it so well, *"Joy is the serious business of heaven!"* And God wants us to share in that joy, and has gone to extraordinary lengths, serious lengths, even to the cross, to secure joy for us, to bring joy down to us. *"Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down ..."* Joy is a gift, a gracious gift, that is born into our souls from above. When Jesus gets together with His disciples on the night before His crucifixion, so much of what He said on that potentially sorrowful night is just infused with joy. *"I have said these things to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."* Jesus' joy, the Father's joy, that's the joy we know by the gracious gift of Life from above, the Joy in which we are invited to live our lives, forever!

Carbonated holiness ... Yes, worship can and should be a laughing matter!