

**Message: “How Can This Be?”**

**How many of you remember Chuck Coulson?** Those of you under the age of 40 may not get the reference. Chuck Coulson was an attorney and political advisor to President Richard Nixon in 1969-70. He was one of the Watergate Seven, pleading guilty to obstruction of justice. Coulson served time in prison in 1974.

**What you may not know is that Chuck Coulson became a Christian in 1973 at the age of 42.** He experienced a radical life change that led him to start the non-profit ministry Prison Fellowship International, write 30 books on faith and focus on teaching around the world. Some of you may have listened to his Breakpoint series.

**Chuck Coulson wrote an outrageously good autobiography more than 35 years ago called *Born Again*.** Chuck may sound like a second Paul, a man who switched sides. But his account of that change shows what an honest spiritual renewal it was.

**‘Having seen through Watergate how vulnerable [a person] can be, I no longer believe I am master of my destiny,’** Coulson wrote.

**‘I need God;** I need friends with whom I can honestly share my failures and feelings of inadequacy.’ He struggled in prayer about what to put down and how to say it. ‘Out of prayer has come the help needed from experienced editors and publishing specialists.’

**One of those specialists was longtime author and Christian Elizabeth Sherrill.** Tibby, as she’s known, tells a funny story about being asked to look at Colson’s manuscript and being brutally frank about its failings. Not sympathetic to his political views at all, she marked it up with one stinging critique after another. To her surprise, the editor passed along the inked-up manuscript directly to Colson.

**Colson proved to be very grateful and in the end he and Tibby became the most unlikely friends.**

**Here’s how he put it in the book’s acknowledgements:** ‘Tibby had been one of those who marched outside the White House in an anti-Vietnam protest back in 1971 while I sat inside, seething with resentment against all demonstrators. In the secular world a Tibby Sherrill could not stomach a Colson manuscript; nor would a Colson let

a Tibby Sherrill within a hundred yards of his book. But because we now share a commitment to Christ we could work together with common purpose, our opposite political viewpoints often producing new insights and more clarity in the manuscript.”<sup>1</sup>

**This feels especially pertinent today.** Would that all people of faith could listen to each other as carefully as these two and learn from each other.

**Jesus told us to love our enemies.** Tibby Sherrill, well in her eighties today, would still not hesitate to march against any war, but her love of this man who was so different from her is unvarnished and her prayers for him undiminished. That’s what comes of being born again.

**Today, we read what is arguably the most famous verse in all of scripture, John 3:16,** *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life.”* You see the verse in many places. People put it on signs on street corners, in protests, at football games, on billboards and more. The verse is important because of the hope that it gives.

**What you may or may not know is, using the words of Paul Harvey, the rest of the story.** Jesus’ promise of eternal life is delivered at the end of a late night conversation with a person who was struggling with their faith.

**Nicodemus was a respected leader in the community.** He was a successful business leader. Nicodemus was a member of the ruling council of the church. He would be a person who taught others.

**Yet Nicodemus was sneaking around.** He met Jesus at night, so no one would see him. He was afraid of what others might say, yet he wanted to know more about Jesus. To me that says he was struggling with the difference between what he was taught and what he was experiencing. To put it another way, Nicodemus knew the letter of the Law, but realized the spirit of the Law is a whole other thing.

**Nicodemus was struggling with the meaning of faith.**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.guideposts.org/faith-and-prayer/prayer-stories/power-of-prayer/chuck-colson-was-born-again>

**This passage is very appropriate for today.** And I’m not just talking about the year of pandemic, racism and political intolerance we’ve gone through. I’m talking about the struggles we’re facing within the church.

**There is little unity in the church today.** To me, it seems like we’re more engaged in parallel monologues, rather than listening and trying to understand each other.

**When I say there’s little unity in the church, I’m speaking at all levels.** The body of Christ on earth is fractured. The United Methodist denomination is at a crossroads. There are congregations who are ready to walk away from our conference. And there is division within our own congregation.

**We are struggling to understand our faith and see how it is relevant to our situation, our life.** That’s what happens in a time of discontinuity. When we feel powerless, isolated and alone, we can become so inwardly focused that we lose sight of God. Our faith wavers. In our hurt, we find it hard to care about what others think or care for others.

**Welcome to the human condition.**

**How many of our friends and family members find themselves in the same situation?** Few people start a conversation about faith or spirituality, yet that’s exactly what we all need.

**We all need the powerful image Jesus gives us.** We need a new narrative, a new direction for our lives. We need to know there’s hope, that God is at work to make things better. Our needs are the needs of our soul. Our spirit is groaning inside of us, at a level too deep for words. Our gut is telling us we need to be filled.

**We try to fill our need with a lot of things.** We can pursue power, money and fame. We can distract ourselves with food, drugs or alcohol, sex or thrills. We can fill our minds with unhealthy things. All that does is deaden us. We become spiritually insensitive. When we dive into self-gratification, we’re adopting a “me-first” attitude. Self-care is important, but when we neglect Jesus’ call and neglect those who love and care for us, that’s when self-care becomes self-indulgence.

**Nicodemus came to Jesus because he saw the signs.** Jesus was doing miraculous things. People were being healed. Lives were saved. Families and communities were being restored. The pardoning and healing work of grace was apparent. There are signs around us. We’ll be celebrating some of them over the next four weeks.

**Nicodemus came to Jesus because he needed to believe.** He wanted to have faith. His soul was groaning, wanting to be fed. Sound familiar?

**Jesus gave Nicodemus what he wanted, but it wasn’t what he expected.** Jesus didn’t offer to take Nicodemus’ struggles away. He didn’t fix things with the council. He didn’t pave the way for Nicodemus to be more successful in business. Jesus offered Nicodemus the only thing that would fill his need: the gift of the Holy Spirit.

**There was only one catch: Nicodemus had to believe.** Nicodemus had to believe in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. This wasn’t an easy lesson. And Jesus knew it. He said, *“So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’ - out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it’s headed next. That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’ by the wind of God, the Spirit of God”* (vv7-8, MSG).

**Nicodemus reply? “How can this happen?”** (v9)

**Jesus said, “You, a teacher, don’t know these basics? Listen carefully.** *I’m speaking sober truth to you. ... There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don’t believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can’t see, the things of God?”* (vv10-12).

**Jesus explains who he is and offers this evidence of God’s grace:** *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”* (vv16-17).

**The only thing keeping us from living a life of grace is ourselves.**

**When we choose a “me-first” attitude, we turn away from God.**

We consider our own interests first. We’re trying to fill the void inside us with our own energy, accomplishments, work and meaning. All too quickly, we find this is shallow and we run out of energy, hope and joy. We find ourselves at odds with God and with others.

**When we choose a “God-first” attitude, we turn to God first in everything.** We pray to understand God’s will. We spend time in God’s presence, our spirit communing with God’s Spirit. We find meaning in life. We’re filled with energy because love and hope are restored. Our faith sustains us, no matter what happens.

**This is what all of the apostles discovered.** It’s the “one thing” Paul held onto throughout his life. And I believe Nicodemus found it as well. I offer this as evidence: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were the two who got permission from Pilate to take Jesus’ body down from the cross, preparing it for burial and placing it in the tomb. Nicodemus no longer cared who knew about his love for Jesus. He did what his faith called him to do. Nicodemus cared.

**I believe the way forward for the church is to rely on faith.**

I encourage each of us, myself included, to turn away from our own self-interest to see God’s will. Believe in the power and work of the Holy Spirit in our community. When we discover the Spirit at work, join in without question.

**We need to learn to deal with our conflict in a healthy way, the way of the peacemaker.** Let’s turn away from fight-or-flee, stop being passive-aggressive. Let’s come to the table of grace filled with awareness of our own fears, faults and hurt feelings, offering forgiveness before it’s asked. Let’s make amends. Then we will know the peace Christ offers, the gift of pardoning and healing grace.

**It won’t be easy.** It will feel risky and uncertain. We’ll have to give forgiveness when it asked for. We’ll have to ask for forgiveness that may not be received. Jesus shows us the way. Salvation without condemnation is grace.

**Believe in God, forgive and you will be set free.**

**John 3:1-17 (CEB)**

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.”

Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it’s not possible to see God’s kingdom.”

Nicodemus asked, “How is it possible for an adult to be born? It’s impossible to enter the mother’s womb for a second time and be born, isn’t it?”

Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don’t be surprised that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ God’s Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. It’s the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus said, “How are these things possible?”

“Jesus answered, “You are a teacher of Israel and you don’t know these things? I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don’t receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.