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Text: John 3:1-17
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Setting: Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

Flesh begets flesh, Spirit begets Spirit

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Making sure things are fair in the world is a hard task to do. Making things fair within a society is even harder to do. Making things fair between siblings in a family, now that is the ultimate challenge. It is always an interesting dynamic in families seeing how the children line up. Countless studies have been done that show birth order in families show different priorities between siblings. As a firstborn, I can identify with fellow eldest siblings when it comes to fairness. I had to live with this or that rule and my younger siblings had better have to do so as well. The curfew had better stay the same as well as the bedtime. It is only fair. It better happen this way.

Pharisees in the Jesus time wanted things to be fair. They wanted to make sure everyone follows the order that are given. They looked all the way back to Moses and took all the laws that he had been given and made new laws to help them keep the original ones.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and wanted everything to be fair. They had endless rules that they followed to be in a right relationship with God. Nicodemus was one of these men. He approached Jesus at night to talk with him. At the time, Jesus was a controversial figure, and as with any controversial figure, a person had to decide whether they wanted to be seen with them or not. Nicodemus chose the more secretive route.

Nicodemus approached Jesus and acknowledged that Jesus was sent from God. Saying that Jesus was a prophet from God. This is further than any other person would have gone in the Pharisee crowd, acknowledging someone was sent from God. In a sense, he was saying, “Jesus, you are who you say you are, you would not be able to do what you are doing if God was not with you.” Nicodemus was showing that he was not there to attack Jesus but to learn from Jesus. As a child would ask their parent, “Mom and dad, do you have another rule for me to follow, so I can stay out of trouble?” Nicodemus was asking, “As a prophet, what words do you give us? What new rule can we add to our list to keep us out of trouble? What more can I do to be right with God?”

Nicodemus is expecting an answer to add to his ‘to do’ list. Jesus, knowing all about the Pharisees and their rules knows what a Pharisee would be looking for in another rule to be given. But what Nicodemus gets is a curve ball that Jesus throws his way. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (Jn. 3:3) Its as if Nicodemus is saying: “Wait, what? This is not the answer I was expecting. I can’t do that.” If I as a slow long distance runner asked a coach for guidance and the coach told me I need to run a 3 minute mile, I would have many questions. The fastest mile ever run was 3:43.13.

The word that is at the heart of this phrase is the Greek word *ἀνωθεν* (*anōthen*). *ἀνωθεν* can be translated two different ways. It can be translated as “again” as it is in the reading, but in other parts of the Bible is it also translated as “from above.”

These are two very different statements. While scratching his head, Nicodemus takes the first definition of again. How can one be born of my mother again? How can I do that? How can I accomplish that?

Often times, we find ourselves wanting to know what we can do to get better. Improving one's self is important, but it should never go so far that we believe that we can accomplish our salvation ourselves. Nicodemus thought he was on the right track. I have a checklist of what I need to do and I think I have done them, now I will add more and see if I can improve even more. As fallen sinners we want to be able to redo things. We want to try again. We are constantly reminded that one sin separates us from God. It didn't matter that Nicodemus knew all the laws and followed them as best he could. He couldn't do the impossible task of following them perfectly, and the even more impossible task of being born again.

Nicodemus was only a man. That which is born of flesh is flesh. Flesh begets flesh. Our sinful nature can only produce more of itself. We can only produce more sins. If we look toward our inner core we see only more deeply into our sinful flesh. We have an inkling to only do what is contrary to God's word. No matter how much we try, we ourselves can never face ourselves toward God. We cannot do the impossible task of being born again. We can't save ourselves. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." (Jn. 3:6)

But what about the other definition of *ἀνωθεν*? From above? Nicodemus was reminded that he couldn't do it. He needed outside help. He needed help from *above*. We need help from *above*, we need outside help. Nicodemus didn't understand it and many times we don't either. Many times, we want things to be fair as the Pharisees did. I deserve what is coming to me, don't take that away from me. Thanks be to God that things are not fair. If we got what we deserved and what was fair, we would receive, death, hell and damnation. Instead we receive grace and mercy. Grace, getting what we don't deserve. Mercy, not getting what we do deserve. We receive the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation.

How is this grace, mercy, forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation accomplished? Jesus, who came from above states in verses 13-17 God's plan. ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

As we walk through this Lenten Season, we consider our sin. We consider what separates us from God. But as we walk, we walk looking forward to the cross, where Christ died for your sin and mine. We look forward to the empty tomb on Easter. Thanks be to God for giving us what we don't deserve not giving us what we deserve. Grace and Mercy. Amen.

"Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine... to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20-21