

# Trinity United Methodist Church

## "Thoughts For Troubled Times"

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### Second Sunday of Lent The Pastor's Thoughts

John 3:1-17



There's been a lot of discussion lately about the state of the church, about the declining number of believers and the increasing secularization of our society. Young people, according to the polls, are not feeling a need for faith in a higher spiritual being, and such needs as they have are being met in more conventional ways. I suppose that's not surprising, given the seemingly constant conflict among various denominations and even, as in ours, within the denomination. Add to that the number of sex abuse cases and often wildly extravagant lifestyles of some famous evangelists, and one begins to see why many, particularly those who have not been raised in the church, would have trouble believing, in having faith. We are told that we are to follow Jesus, to believe that he is the Son of God, to seek to imitate him in our daily lives, but that all takes faith. How much faith does it take to follow? How much trust in God must we have? What does it mean to be part of the kingdom? How can we be born again? That's the question that Nicodemus asked in our selection for the week from the gospel of John. Moving forward in faith, believing in something you cannot see, particularly in a secular and cynical world, is a risky endeavor! Without the willingness to risk however, without stepping out of the crowd and seeking something beyond what we can hold and grasp, is the only way to truly find, if you'll pardon the word, "success". I don't mean materially, but rather the obtaining of what makes this life worthwhile, of what gives you hope for something beyond this life, beyond the here and now.

How much faith does it take to follow? How much risk are we willing to take? That's the crux of the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus. That's what Jesus meant when he said you must be reborn. For birth is an inherently risky procedure. And if you don't believe that, ask any pregnant woman entering the labor and delivery room. In spite of the advances in prenatal care, in spite of the wonders of medical science, find me a woman who is not anxious as she is wheeled in to give birth. For every expectant mother knows that birth is a risky adventure. Because giving birth requires commitment. Giving birth requires all that we have. With that in mind, Jesus tells Nicodemus that being part of the kingdom of God requires the same. Jesus tells him that following God takes the same kind of commitment; that being part of the kingdom of God demands giving all that we have. Remember what Jesus said? "I assure you, unless you are born again, you can never see the kingdom of God." In other words, no one can be a follower of God unless he is willing to take a risk. No one can be part of the kingdom of God unless he is ready for commitment. We must be willing to let the old life go and trust in God for a new birth. "You must be born again" is the way Jesus put it. You must take the risk to start again. For taking risks is the only way we grow — not only in business, but in our personal and spiritual life, as well. Either we take a reasonable risk and expand the horizons of our life, or we become stagnant and, in the end, live a life of regret.

Did you know that when people over the age of 95 are asked in a survey what changes they would make if they could live their life over again, one of the top three responses they always give is that they would take more risks. It seems that at age 95 people are more willing to be born again. But you don't have to be 95 to look back on life and wish you'd been more of a risk-taker. Think back to high school days. Don't you wish you had taken the risk to try out for the school play or the cheerleading squad or the football team? When you look back on some of your friendships, don't you wish you'd taken the risk of being more honest and open with the people you love? Many of us can look back on businesses or investments or personal ventures and wish we'd hadn't played it so safe at the time. No one can go back to seize opportunities time has already snatched away. No one

can live life again. But we can go forward. We can take a risk of trusting Jesus. We can look to God to lead. So, let's take a moment and look at what risk is all about, and why spiritual risks are so well worth taking.

First, let's ask: What is risk? Well, risk is simply the ability to stretch beyond the usual limits in reaching for a goal. Risk involves facing a fear, chancing failure. Maybe it's the fear of the unknown, the uncomfortable, the unacquainted. Or maybe it's the fear of physical harm or emotional hurt. Whatever it is, risk always involves adventure. When I was younger, I had a small street motorcycle. It was designed for regular road use, but sometimes I'd ride it through the woods on the edge of the city. Going twenty miles an hour down the smooth streets in town was pretty boring. There wasn't much risk involved in that. But when I'd go off road, into the deep weeds, down twisting dirt trails, dodging trees and bushes — places where there was some risk of falling and going out of control — then riding became an adventure. The same can be said for living a life of faith. It's when we face our fears and take a risk that we experience the thrill of following Jesus. For faith and risk are intertwined. It is only when we stretch the horizons of our lives, it is only when we venture away from the comfortable to follow Christ that faith takes on its true dimension. That's what Jesus was trying to tell Nicodemus. You must be born again. You must risk a new beginning. You must trust yourself to a new birth in God to truly be part of the kingdom of God. As long as you hold on to the old, as long as you are afraid to follow, as long as you are unwilling to risk your life for God, you will not be part of God's great adventure. And that adventure is all around us. For instance, when we follow God's teachings on honesty despite the fear of the price it may cost us, that's spiritual adventure. When we ask God to open doors for us to make a difference in the lives of others around us despite our fear of where that may lead us, that's spiritual adventure. When we talk to someone about our faith, in spite of our fear of what they may think of us because of it, that's spiritual adventure. When we think enough about God to want to be in worship in spite of the inconvenience it may cause us, that's spiritual adventure. Those are the times when we leave the smooth, paved road, when we abandon the boring residential streets for the adventure of unmarked trails — that's when faith becomes real and that's the new birth that Jesus is promising us. Faith means being born again as a new person, leaving the comfortable behind to adventure with God.

God asks us to be risk-takers for Christ. God calls us to follow Jesus on paths that are unknown. God invites us to venture forth in faith beyond the ordinary and mundane. How much faith does it take to follow? In Matthew 17, verse 20, Jesus answers that question. He says, "If you have faith even as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain: Move from here to there, and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." The question is not how much faith does it take to follow; it is whether we will use the faith we have. It is whether we will put our faith into practice and venture forth with God. The Bible says in Hebrews 11:6 that "God rewards those who seek him." Rewards come to those who take the risk of faith. Adventure awaits those who decide to follow. New life is ours when we consent to be born again. But the first step begins with us. We must take the risk.

Let me suggest you begin by praying a new prayer to God. Begin by offering the prayer that Nicodemus was unable to make. Begin by saying, "God, I want to take the adventure of faith with you. I want the new beginning that comes with being born again. I want to get serious about my faith. Use me like you've never used me before." This is the kind of prayer that says, "I want to be part of the action." This is the kind of prayer that says, "I want to grow in my faith." This is the kind of prayer that says, "I want a new birth in my following. I want to adventure with you, O God." It's a risky prayer, I admit, and a prayer that God will answer differently for each person. For some, it will mean devoting ourselves to beginning a new routine of Bible reading and prayer, deepening our faith through spiritual discipline, committing ourselves to faithfully be present in worship and prayer. For others, it will mean asking God to use us as a blessing in the lives of others, starting a conversation about values and faith, sharing our faith with others and helping them to new birth as well. For some, it may mean that God has basic training in mind — time to get serious about Bible study and building a more solid foundation for our faith. It may mean setting aside some bad habit or being more loving at home.

Think of the alternatives before us — letting God give us a new birth in following Jesus, risking adventure with a faith that is alive, or living a comfortable life, maintaining a non-threatening existence, holding on to the old life that is ours. It's the choice that faced Nicodemus and the choice that faces each of us. But remember the choice we make determines the life we will live. Let me illustrate with a story: A man looked

around and saw people love each other. He saw that love made strenuous demands on them. It required sacrifice and self-denial. It produced arguments and anguish. It involved risk and hurt and the man decided that love cost too much. He decided not to allow himself to be hurt. The risk was too great. The man looked around him and saw people strive for great goals. He saw men and women pursuing high ideals, but he saw that the striving was frequently mixed with disappointment and the ideals often carried a great cost. And the man decided that great goals and high ideals were too costly for him. He decided the risk was too great. The man looked around and saw people serving others. He saw them giving money to the poor and spending time in their care. And he saw that the more they served, the more they were needed. He saw ungrateful receivers and tired out workers. And he decided not to waste his life serving. The risk was too great. And when the man died, he went up to heaven and offered his life to God. Undiminished, unburdened, unsoiled, his life was free of the hurts and worries of the world around him. The man said proudly to God, "This is my life, safely lived and risk free." And God replied, "What life? That's not life that you lived!" How much faith does it take to follow? How much are you willing to risk? For however much you risk is how much your life is worth. Remember Jesus said, "I assure you, unless you are born again, you can never see the kingdom of God."

*Pastor Mike*