

“Misunderstanding Jesus”

Misunderstandings happen all the time. There can be any number of reasons for misunderstandings: not hearing, not truly listening, not comprehending, a language barrier, inadequate context, or sometimes more than one understanding is possible. In the Gospel of John misunderstandings occur regularly, so much so that New Testament scholars identify them as a literary device the Gospel writer uses to clarify Jesus' message. Yes, that's right! You understood me! John uses misunderstanding to clarify Jesus' meaning!

Today's Gospel lesson, containing an exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus is the perfect example of the way John uses misunderstanding to make a point. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a member of the educated, wealthy and influential class. He has everything that makes for a good life, yet he apparently can't shake the feeling that there is something more out there for him, that he is missing something. (That is how it usually is with us. We have a sense of something missing without having the faintest clue as to what "it" might be—a sure sign of the Spirit at work.) Whatever "it" is, Nicodemus is hoping that this Jesus, who he has heard is able to perform miracles (which John calls signs), will be able to help him find it. And so Nicodemus goes to Jesus under cover of night, presumably because he is embarrassed and doesn't want anyone to see him. Yet, you also get the feeling that the author wants to indicate something even deeper by telling us that when he went to see Jesus he was in the dark. When he arrives he greets Jesus with compliments and praise, perhaps trying to butter him up before he asks what he came to ask. *“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs apart from the presence*

of God.” But Jesus will have none of it. Even before the question on Nicodemus’ mind hits his lips Jesus offers an answer. *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God, without being born anew.”*

Nicodemus is stunned and mystified. That is his advice! It doesn’t even make sense. *“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born again?”* Nicodemus, an apparent literalist, misunderstands Jesus. But, fortunate for him (and for us) he gets another shot at it. *“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I have said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

It’s important when we read this story to know that John likes to have Jesus use words with double or even triple meaning, so that the word for anew or again, also means from above. Or when he talks about being born of water the reference is to both the waters of birth, as well as to the baptismal waters of our spiritual re-birth. And finally, when he talks about the wind blowing where it chooses, the word also means spirit or the life-giving breath of God.

Considering this proclivity for using words with multiple meanings and interpretations, it is quite understandable that Nicodemus keeps misunderstanding; Nicodemus takes things at face value, while Jesus’ references are to more than the surface experience of the flesh, but also the inner depths of the spirit. Eventually, however, the point becomes clear enough through Nicodemus’s misunderstandings and Jesus’ explanations. The point is that Nicodemus needs a spiritual rebirth, a

personal transformation. And John seems to be trying to get us to understand that that is what we need as well.

This story is, of course, where the term “born again Christian” has its genesis, which, for some of us, may be an immediate turn off. As Marcus Borg writes, “most of us have known at least one person who was born again in a remarkably unattractive way. When being born again leads to a rigid kind of righteousness, judgmentalism, and sharp boundaries between an in-group and an out-group, it’s either not a genuine born again experience or it has some static in it.”¹ In other words, misunderstandings of Jesus still abound.

Immediately following the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus comes one of the most famous, and perhaps misunderstood, proclamations in all of scripture: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” To many this passage is the definitive proof that the point of faith is simply to believe. Thus, in order to be born again, all one must do is profess belief in Jesus Christ.

Author Frederick Buechner writes, “Some think a Christian is one who necessarily believes certain things. That Jesus was the son of God, say. Or that Mary was a virgin...Or that all other religions are wrong. Some think a Christian is one who necessarily does certain things. Such as going to church. Getting baptized...Reading the Bible. Doing a good deed a day. Some think a Christian is just a nice person. [But] Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.’ He didn’t say that any particular ethic, doctrine, or religion was the way, the truth and the life. He said that he was. He didn’t say that it was by believing or doing

¹ *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. San Francisco: Harpers San Francisco, 2003. p. 104.

anything particular that you could “come to the Father.” He said that it was only by him—by living, participating in, being caught up by the way of life that he embodied, that was his way. A Christian [then] is one who is on the way, though not necessarily very far along it, and who has at least some dim and half-baked idea of whom to thank.”²

I don't know about you, but I take great comfort knowing that Jesus stuck with Nicodemus, even though he kept missing the point. I am thankful for the role that misunderstanding plays in the Gospel of John, for I am convinced that I misunderstand Jesus as much as any of us. Having devoted much of my life to studying scripture, and other documents of faith in order to understand Jesus, all I can tell you is that he is like no other subject I have ever studied. Even in the most complicated fields, even when I cannot grasp the technical nuances, I recognize that there are people who can. Trying to understand Jesus is different. The more one digs, the more one becomes convinced that Jesus is an inexhaustible mystery. In the famous words of Albert Schweitzer: “He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”³

² *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). p.14.

³ *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). p. 403.

Calling Jesus an ineffable mystery is not license for us to stop trying to understand him or make sense of our faith. Just like John used misunderstanding to clarify Jesus' message, our failures too serve a purpose: they remind us that our faith is not reliant on us, but it is a relationship initiated by God. The most important choice then for those of us who are interested in being caught up in the way of life Jesus embodied is not one of belief, but openness to the Spirit of God.

You'll notice a similar theme in the lesson from Genesis. Abram doesn't decide to be the father of a great nation. God chooses him. God blesses him to be a blessing. And just in case you haven't understood my point today, it isn't because he is wealthy, powerful or possesses great understanding. It is simply God's gracious will that it be so. Abram is not left without recourse, though. He must choose to accept this calling and follow where God is leading him. And perhaps because he too had been missing something, our passage informs us, "Abram went, as the Lord had told him."

And that is how it is with us as well. We, like Abram, are chosen, blessed to be a blessing, and called to follow. And this is not our own doing; it is God's gracious gift to us in Jesus Christ. The affirmation we receive from today's Gospel is that we can no more choose to be born again, as we could choose to be born the first time. It is not a matter of belief, you see, it is a matter of trusting the Word we have received through Jesus. For God so loved the world, John tells us. For God so loved the world...sometimes I wish the Gospel writer would have just stopped there. I really do. Then there would be much less of a chance that we would misunderstand the message and mess it up so bad, making it all about me, me, me. (Although I am guessing we would manage to find some way.) If we would only remember what John writes just a few verses earlier, we would get a much clearer picture of the meaning of our faith: *Do not be astonished that I have said to you, 'You must be born anew.' The wind blows*

where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” And so perhaps the real question of faith is not so much, “Do we get it?” as it is, “Have we got it?”

Let us pray: Great and good God, give us pure hearts that we may see you, humble hearts that we may hear you, hearts of love that we may serve you, hearts of faith that we may live in you, reverent hearts that we may worship you, here and in the world out there, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (this prayer is adapted from and inspired by the words of Dag Hammarskjöld.)