

## **BORN FROM ABOVE**

John 3:1-10

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on June 26, 2022*

As a pastor, I sometimes get calls from parents who are panicked because their child has asked a question about God for which they have no answer. Now that Ella has begun her spiritual journey in baptism, Steve and Lora might get their own awkward questions one day. So, this morning I want to share a story from the Bible about a religious leader who, under cover of darkness, came to see Jesus and asks his own spiritual question, as well as recent scientific evidence suggesting that when a child starts asking spiritual questions, we should drop everything and explore that impulse with them rather than panic because we have no answers.

First to the story in John 3. It's one of the more famous exchanges in the gospels, and we heard part of it within the baptismal liturgy, even before you heard it directly from John's gospel. If you've ever heard people talking about being "born again," this encounter is where the term comes from; and it's been as misunderstood in our time as it was by poor Nicodemus in this story. This conversation happens very early in Jesus' ministry, but enough has already gone on that Nicodemus, as part of the religious establishment, doesn't want to be seen chatting it up with Jesus. So, he comes to find Jesus after dark.

Clearly Nicodemus wants something or he wouldn't be making this effort; but he doesn't make his objective clear. Maybe he doesn't really know what he wants. Maybe he's just curious about this guy who is drawing crowds with miracles. Maybe Nicodemus just wants Jesus to know that, despite some contentious exchanges, Jesus does have support among the Pharisees—who were one branch of Israel's religious and political leadership. Nicodemus begins, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person." "*We know,*" he says. Nicodemus is speaking for more than just himself.

Jesus responds with what is basically a compliment, telling Nicodemus that it takes a certain kind of spiritual insight to understand what Nicodemus has just told him. But Jesus doesn't say "spiritual insight." Instead, he uses the metaphor of spiritual birth. The phrase is often translated "born again." The word can also mean "born from above," but clearly it's the "born again" meaning that throws Nicodemus, losing him any brownie points for spiritual insight he might have gotten for his first comment.

The job of the Pharisees was to spend all day studying the things of God, so that they could help the people interpret and follow God's law. They were learned, literate men. So, it's surprising when Nicodemus can't recognize a metaphor. He takes Jesus literally; and this otherwise sane, grown, educated man says in essence, "What? How can you be born after growing old? How do you crawl back into your mother's womb and be born a second time?" I would give good money to see Jesus' face when Nicodemus asks that question.

Jesus ignores the question and continues his metaphor, saying that to enter the kingdom of God a person must be born of water and the spirit. The church for a long time insisted that the "water" part of that line

meant being baptized, which is why that language is said at the moment of baptism. But in the very next line Jesus says what he means, “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The water we are born of is the water of the womb that breaks and flushes us out of our mothers at our physical birth. If the early Church Fathers had listened to women, we could have explained that.

What Jesus is adding is that there is also a spiritual birth, which can happen at any age and does not involve physical birth canals. The waters of baptism bring both of those things together, the symbol of the water that brings physical birth is used to mark our spiritual birth in baptism. But poor Nicodemus is still baffled by the metaphor and says, “How can these things be?” Jesus realizes he’s going to have his work cut out for him as he says in astonishment, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

In other words, what Jesus is saying here isn’t rocket science. He’s not talking about something you need a degree in theology to grasp. He’s saying that human beings are both physical and spiritual beings and, just like we have a physical birth that allows us to mature physically, we also need a spiritual birth to see our place in the bigger picture and to explore the questions of existence, meaning, and consciousness. Nicodemus is steeped in his religion, but is still a babe in the Spirit. He’s had a spiritual birth, but has not grown past spiritual infancy.

There are lots of things that can be said about this passage, but the thing that strikes me here in 2022 is that clinical psychology is now providing evidence of exactly what Jesus describes—an inborn trait of spirituality in every human being that is often evident in our questions and experiences before we’re even aware that such a thing exists. A trait that we frequently ignore or suppress, often because we, like Nicodemus, haven’t learned to see it as something distinct from organized religion. The science is now telling us what a catastrophic mistake that is, both for ourselves and for our children.

While not the first psychologist to study spirituality, the person bringing the research to the New York Times Bestseller list is Dr. Lisa Miller, a professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University and the founder and director of the Spirituality Mind Body Institute, the first Ivy League graduate program in spirituality and psychology. For over a decade she has held joint appointments in the department of psychiatry at Columbia University medical school, and her research has been published in more than a hundred empirical, peer-reviewed articles in leading journals.

She first wrote for a broader public in 2015 in a book called *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* and then last year, *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life*. I have read both within the past year and the findings I’m going to share come from those two books. I’ll note that *The Spiritual Child* is a much denser read than *The Awakened Brain*, but its focus on child development is critically important. The text of this sermon includes footnotes for the research I’m going to share, and it will be posted to our website along with the video as the sermons are each week if you want to see the sourcing.

The first thing to understand about Dr. Miller’s work is that she tested for spirituality and religion as separate things. How you define those terms is key, and many have tried a variety of definitions over the years. But then came a 1997 article in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* on the work of psychiatric genetic-epidemiologist Kenneth Kendler, who looked at both religion and spirituality in two thousand adult twins. What he found was evidence of significant benefits associated with the kind of spirituality that described having “a personal relationship with the transcendent.”<sup>1</sup>

Religion was defined as adherence to a religious denomination with a distinct set of beliefs and experiences, and the research showed that the particular religion made no difference whatsoever in the outcomes. It didn't matter if the people were Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or no professed religion at all. For many, spirituality and religion existed together; but for many more, they had no connection. There was strong spirituality in people who had no religion, and strong religious adherence in those who did not register on the scale of spirituality.<sup>2</sup> And in all cases it was the spirituality—that sense of a personal relationship with the transcendent, rather than the religion—that gave the benefits.

So, according to Dr. Kendler's findings, not only can you be spiritual but not religious; you can also be religious but not spiritual. Dr. Miller ran with that second point in her own research and discovered that, for those who had a rigid adherence to creed *without* a sacred personal relationship, there was often a correlation to "dangerous risk taking, including unprotected, high-risk, and abusive sexual activity."<sup>3</sup> Sound familiar?

For at least a century, philosophers and scholars have argued about whether religion is something that does harm by its very nature. It's a battle that is very much alive today from ivy halls to random people on the internet. Dr. Miller's research suggests that there is, in fact, a danger in religion *without* spirituality. Mix spirituality and religion and they can support and enhance each other. Put spirituality out in the world by itself, without religion, and it does just fine, as long as it is intentionally honored and nurtured in love. But take the Spirit out of religion, and you're on a dangerous path. Examples are, daily, on very public display.

Just on the issue of substance abuse Dr. Miller found: "personal devotion is highly protective against heavy substance use and abuse" but "rigid adherence to creed without a sense of the sacred relationship does not prevent against substance abuse." Specifically with adolescents, her published findings "showed that an adolescent with a strong personal relationship with the higher power, compared to an adolescent without this inner source of spirituality, is 70 to 80 percent less likely to engage in heavy substance use or substance abuse. There was no protectiveness at all related to the intensity of adherence to the family religious tradition."<sup>4</sup>

There's more. In the spiritually attuned people, Dr. Miller found lower cortisol levels, the stress hormone.<sup>5</sup> It is also "associated with significantly lower rates of depression, substance use and abuse, and risk taking. This includes sexual risk taking in young adults and exposure to STDs, along with thrill seeking, driving fast, and physical endangerment, especially in boys. No other preventative factor known to science and medicine has such a broad-reaching and powerful influence on the daily decisions that make-or-break health and wellness."<sup>6</sup>

Looking only at spirituality, regardless of adherence to a religion, she found "that people with a developed spirituality get sick less, are happier, and feel more connected and less isolated. In the context of illness, people with a developed spirituality show positive effects for resilience and healing."<sup>7</sup>

In both adults and children, spirituality gave protection against severe depression, an effect that could be seen in brain scans. In *The Awakened Brain*, Miller writes, "The high-spiritual brain was healthier and more robust than the low-spiritual brain. And the high-spiritual brain was thicker in and stronger in *exactly the same regions* that weaken and wither in depressed brains."<sup>8</sup>

Further, her research shows that “The awakened brain includes a set of innate perceptual capacities, that exist in every person, through which we experience love and connection, unity, and a sense of guidance from and dialogue with life. And when we engage these perceptual capacities—when we make full use of how we’re built—our brains become structurally healthier and better connected, and we access unsurpassed psychological benefits: less depression, anxiety, and substance abuse; and more positive psychological traits such as grit, resilience, optimism, tenacity, and creativity.”<sup>9</sup>

It’s taken over 2,000 years, but science has now begun to prove Jesus’ words to Nicodemus. We must have both a physical and a spiritual birth to realize our full human potential. Spirituality is not a product of our environment, although it can be either enhanced or suppressed by it. It is an inborn and universal trait, something that awakens the minute a toddler is mesmerized by a bug or a flower and that surges, along with everything else, in adolescence with an almost desperate quest for meaning, belonging, and purpose. Science is proving that nurturing that innate spirituality brings tremendous benefits for lifelong thriving.

Dr. Miller’s findings are why my ministry here is focused on spiritual development. I think the teachings of Jesus, the example of John Wesley, and the practices of the church can provide a helpful framework to support and nurture our spiritual growth. But, in the end, I don’t care if you become a Methodist. I’m not worried if you profess a faith outside of Christianity. You’re welcome here if you identify as spiritual but not religious or believe in no God at all. I’m not here to police your theology or orthodoxy. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, “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.”

I’m here to be a midwife to everyone within the sound of my voice; to help you give birth to and nurture the Spirit already growing within you. I’m here to remind all of us that our physical birth is not enough; that to live our best lives and to give the best opportunities to our children, we must be born again. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, Lisa. *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015) p. 7

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 7-8

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 8

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 43

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 37-8

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 38

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 28

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life* (New York: Random House, 2021) p. 7

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 9