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WHAT-IF'S, IF-ONLY'S, DO-OVERS AND SECOND CHANCES

If you've ever cringed in the presence of a self-proclaimed "born again" Christian, you're not alone.

If you've never been able to identify the day and the hour you first believed there could really be something to all this gospel stuff, and yet have found along your own path some deeper resonating truths, take heart.

As one scholar and believer aptly and succinctly once put it, "all of us know at least one person who was born again in a remarkably unattractive way." (M. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*) At the same time, he also asserts the transformative born-again process is central to the message of Christianity, should be reclaimed, and more deeply understood.

This commentary is just such an effort. It was first shared in a recent PATHWAYS gathering, as a reflection and group response to the common lectionary text designated for the second week of the Lenten season.

Text: John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "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. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

I. First, a biblical commentary on the text

We're well aware the gospel of John was written around the end of the first

century CE. As such, it is helpful and important to understand the vast majority of the sayings *attributed* to the historical Jesus are precisely that. Long gone were any firsthand accounts.

What we have instead are the early formations of the first community of believers, interpreting the message of the person Jesus; along with the remarkable transformation that had occurred in the lives of those who had become part of this religious movement within Judaism.

As such, the private exchange in the dead of night between a character named Nicodemus and Jesus is best understood as a symbolic story, not a historical event; as any number of commentators have previously pointed out. It's veracity – that is, the power to be found in a truth it conveys beyond anything “factual” (which simply cannot be claimed or established with regard to its authenticity) -- lies in the way it expresses what the early community of believers found to be consistent with the “voice” and message of Jesus.

Furthermore, the overwhelming opinion of biblical scholarship finds Jesus himself never identified himself, nor claimed to be, the Messiah of God, the Christ. Again, the passages *accredited* to him that suggest otherwise are precisely that. He lived and died a Jew, and understood his brief public ministry as a radical way of more fully embracing his own religious tradition. It is just such a focus on his own religious tradition, in fact, that makes his exchange with Nicodemus, the Pharisee, so dramatic.

The passage can be further divided into two distinct parts. The first part of the story includes this setting and exchange between the two men as the early church *imagined* it.

The second part begins with, “In truth, I tell you that we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen.” This is clearly a confessional statement of belief, in retrospect, about *who* Jesus was *imagined* to be. It concludes with the familiar 3:16: “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”

Regrettably, the “only begotten Son” image, that “whoever believes in him,” has not only left the impression of exclusive singularity for some; that is, this Christ Jesus of John's early Christian community is the *only* way. It also offers a sort of cheap and shoddy kind of Grace. Just *say* you believe and, poof, you're “saved” in some magical way.

Commentator Harry Cook offers an extremely helpful reminder when he says, “the Greek ζῶν ἀιώνιον (eternal life) does not necessarily mean life with an

indefinite end, but rather a life one enjoys after and because of that second birth which gives the new-born a clearer perspective on life.”

I liken it to the difference between making dinner reservations for a future “heavenly banquet” – as if that were to ever be understood in a *literal* way -- while missing the real feast already prepared at our common table.

Later in John’s gospel we have the equally familiar line, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Interestingly, it’s a passage most often recited these days at funerals; leaving one to wonder why such a “way” is merely meant to be travelled in some nether realms, beginning with one’s departure from this world.

Jesus as the “way” *incarnate* (manifested in fully human form) is clearly a predominant theme in the fourth gospel. But what John’s message means is that the “way” embodied in Jesus is the path of death and resurrection, dying and rising to a new “life” in God. Again, as biblical scholar, Marcus Borg puts it, it is about a “way” of living, not a surefire formula of simply believing something for some future eternity.

In fact, as Borg also frames it, rather than being some unique revelation of an exclusive way known only to Jesus, and shared only with those willing to follow only him, his *lose-your-life-to-find-it* way of living in this world is a universal theme in all the enduring religious traditions.

This reminds us, once again, there are many *pathways* to the same God. Embracing one does not preclude or negate others.

Meanwhile, this foundational understanding and background is crucial to a deeper understanding of this story of Nicodemus’ struggle to grasp the significance of that born-again experience; moving from the old one-shot deal of birth and death and then what? to death and rebirth as a way of already living in the eternal “now” of God’s presence.

II. Interpretive Commentary: If-Only’s, What-if’s, Do-Overs and Second Chances

When I was a child in the fifth grade, I had to memorize and recite Robert Frost’s lines about those two roads diverging in a yellow wood. It was almost a required rite of passage at West Main Elementary, in Kalamazoo.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

It's almost easier to recall it now, more than a half century later. But I still vividly remember the first time when it was still fresh in my memory, on that dreaded day of reckoning.

Fists clenched, hands at my sides, standing rigid before a class of my peers, seated at their desks; not daring to look at any of them, for fear their giggles and the smirks on their faces would break my concentration, and the rhythm of my mindless rote memorization. In two deep breaths, I rattled off those four stanzas, spitting out words like machine gun fire:

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and sorry I could not travel ... blah, blah, blah ... rat-a-tat-tat ... I took the road less travelled by, and that has made all the difference." Gasp.

When the smoke cleared, I found I was still standing upright, somehow unscathed. Behind me, Mrs. Carter's voice softly uttered those simple, sweet words of absolution, "That'll do, Johnny. You can return to your desk."

Subjecting a shy kid to such an ordeal is understandable, I suppose, from the perspective of a grade school teacher, parent or other mentor; particularly, given the subject matter. In retrospect, one tends to look back at the choices one made in their youth; so often done so impetuously and with little conscious reflection. Knowing how "way leads on to way," who wouldn't want to advise and caution one who still has yet to embark on life's journey, with the majority of their choices still before them.

But if I was at all typical for my age of years, the practical good of such a beneficent poem could only be laid down like a young wine, to age and mellow with maturity. And maturity, for most of us, comes with mileage. Mileage is

another word for experience. And experience is sometimes another word for a mistake, or two, or three, or more along the way.

Still, in retrospect, one is sometimes tempted to say, *if only* one had stood a while longer and stared a little further down one of those two roads, to “where it bent in the undergrowth” ...

It sometimes leaves us to wonder about all the purely-speculative “*what-if’s*.” Where would the other path have led us? It’s the flip side, sometimes, of those “*if-only’s*” we sometimes entertain.

Sometimes it’s a deliberate choice, and one has no one to blame but themselves. Sometimes it’s totally random and capricious; you just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. If only I hadn’t gone down this road or that, how might my life have been different, possibly better, or worse?

Sometimes you never outlive your mistakes. So you learn them from them, or even learn to live with them. Sometimes you look back and realize if I’d taken a different road, maybe I’d be long dead and gone by now.

The other night, when I first shared these thoughts with those who’d come together for our PATHWAYS gathering, some of our participants readily offered up their own poignant real life examples: a turn in the road, a warning sign missed, a random choice, and a chance encounter. It was another turn in the road. It was almost like a chance encounter, and together we moved forward.

We operate in an empirical world of observable cause and effect. Choices have consequences. You reap what you sow, whether intentional or not. If there’s any fairness, then sometimes we think we deserve a “*do-over*.”

“*If-only’s*”, “*what-if’s*” and “*do-overs*” are often tinged with remorse, regret, and the lingering realization of “had we only known then what we know now.” It is baggage we carry, sometimes for years, or a lifetime.

We say a healthy person with some mileage under their belt, usually learns to lay their baggage down, lighten the load and leave it all behind. Forgive and forget; at least forgive yourself.

But is there something else? Is there any more? Where’s that bridge over troubled water, say, when whatever choices have been made are like water under a bridge? And, where might such a bridge lead us?

I wonder if it was just those kinds of questions that led Nicodemus to Jesus under cover of darkness, in the gospel’s imaginative tale. *Something* must have drawn him to at least want to know how it was that Jesus seemed – by the signs he had

demonstrably shown -- to have taken a different road; one, perhaps, which Nicodemus never before knew existed. In the yellow wood, he'd begun to wonder, was there another way?

Now, one could regard Nicodemus as a thick-skulled literalist or a simple ignoramus. Take your pick. It doesn't matter. Instead, I think he was just hard of hearing. I picture him standing in the middle of the road, in the middle of the night. He can look back over his shoulder and see from whence he came. But he can't see the fork in the road ahead, and Jesus is throwing him a curve, when he tells him about being born again. "In truth I tell you that no one can see the rule of God except he is born from above."

Sure, Nicodemus knows how to look back to the day he was born, his childhood, days of youth and choices he made or were thrust upon him. He probably even had to endure far more memorization drills of Torah than I did Robert Frost's poem. And, if he was like most, he'd probably accumulated a bag full of "*if-only's*" and "*what-if's*."

Being a teacher of Torah you would have thought the tradition as he had practiced it would have given him a roadmap for the way ahead. But it only seems to have given him a way to look back at what happened before. When he asks how he could possibly re-enact a do-over, what he really wants to know is -- if it were even possible -- how could he hope it could ever turn out any different, or any better, than before?

"How can one go back into the womb to be born again", he asks? It's a silly question for an educated religious leader; that is, if one presumes he is really asking it in a literal way. Instead, the question is merely rhetorical, since he himself knows such a do-over is impossible. Which means, as far as Nicodemus can figure out, you're stuck with the remorse and regret of your unresolved "*if-onlys*" and "*what-ifs*." He remains in the dark about *another way*. So Jesus elaborates.

"I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ... 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."

Jesus -- especially the "voice" of Jesus heard by the gospel writer's early community of believers -- knows that nobody gets a "*do-over*." But you do get a second chance. In fact, you get them again and again.

The *born-again* experience of dying to the old ways, and the deadness of the past, only to be raised up again to an abundant new life -- what Jesus calls life in

the “spirit” -- is not just a once-only choice between two divergent paths. It’s a whole gospel chocked full of second chances.

It’s the *other* way, the narrow way, that counter-intuitive way of losing and loss to find one’s self. *Each* time we come to a fork in the road, we not only have a choice, but a chance to choose this other path; this path of truth and grace.

On a mild early spring day in ’59, I stood before my young classmates and recited the lines of a poem with little comprehension. All I knew was that in this literary rite of passage I hoped to never pass that way again. If only I’d known then what I’ve come to know now; that I’d be “telling this with a sigh, somewhere ages and ages hence.”

Now I try to lay down and leave behind my “*what-if’s*,” “*if-only’s*” and “*do-overs*.” It lightens the load considerably. There’s a lot of water under the bridge, so I cross over.

Knowing that this way “leads on to way,” I look ahead. Overhead, a bird takes flight, and I see signs of a stirring in the wind.