

Lent 2
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A few years ago at the Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled in some way assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with enthusiasm and desire to run the race to the finish, and to win.

But when the gun sounded, everyone took off, except for one boy, who stumbled on the asphalt, and tumbled over a couple of times into a heap of bruises and bruised ego, and as he lay there on the track, he began to cry. Well, the other eight heard the boy cry, and they all slowed down and paused. Then they all turned around and went back. Every one of them. One girl with Down's syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better." Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line.

Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for ten minutes. Maybe you've heard that story before, but the people who were there to witness this event are still telling the story. And they're still telling it, because deep down we all know, that what really matters in this life, is more than winning for yourself. What truly matters in this life is helping others win, even if it means slowing yourself down and changing your course.

There are many valuable lessons we could draw from that story, and I think it's pretty thought-provoking to consider that the people we often call disabled, because of the various challenges they have, may actually have a better understanding of what truly matters in life, because of the very challenges that they have.

Like Jesus, the Good shepherd, who leaves the 99 to go after the lost sheep, these 8 runners all became shepherds to ensure that one of their own was not left behind. And in the end, all became winners.

The story challenges us to live in a different way.

The story challenges us to look at those with disabilities as our very own.

In our gospel reading for today we hear the story of a man who was also challenged to look at life in a different way, Nicodemus, in his encounter with Jesus.

Nicodemus was a teacher of the law, a professor of religion at the temple in Jerusalem. He is described as "older in life" which probably means he had already raised his children and he probably had grandchildren. And like many of us who are up in years he had tons of life experience to draw from and he probably thought he had pretty much seen it all.

And by this point in his life, his relationship with God, was primarily just going through the motions. He knew the Law of Moses, for he was a teacher of it, but his inner enthusiasm for God just wasn't there any more.

Then Jesus showed up in his town, and when Nicodemus went to hear him preach in the temple, he sensed that Jesus had something inside of him that he no longer had. He was moved by Jesus' preaching, so he decided to go and talk with him.

So quietly, one night, Nicodemus went over to the home where Jesus was staying. He went at around midnight, because he didn't want any of his fellow professors to know what he was doing. So he comes to Jesus' house and knocks on the door, "I know it is late, but my name is Nicodemus. I am a professor of religious law down at the temple, and I would like to speak to you for a minute.

Jesus agrees, invites him in and asks him, "How can I help you?"

Nicodemus says, "Things are not quite right with me. They aren't quite right inside of me. I sense that you have something that I don't have anymore.

I am tired. My lectures are stale. I am getting old and slow.

I am interested in what advice you would have for me?"

Well Jesus, had this uncanny ability to look right into a person's heart, so he said, "I know the problem you are having Nicodemus. It is not that you are old; it is not that you are tired;

it is not that you are worn out.

The problem is that you are no longer close to God.

You have drifted away.

God is no longer living in the center of your heart.

Nicodemus you need to be born again."

"Born again? Take and push me back into my mother's womb? Come on now. I can't be born again."

"Nicodemus, my friend, you don't understand. You need to change your ways of thinking. You need to let go of your way of controlling God and your understanding of what it means to be follower. You need to be open to letting God change you, for God is doing a new thing in you today!

You need to be born anew, to experience rebirth in your relationship with God.

You need to be born of the cleansing waters of God.

You need to be born of the Spirit, you need to be born from above."

This was revolutionary for Nicodemus. He thought he knew how it was with God. He thought there wasn't anything new under the sun. He had been attending church all his life and he'd never done it that way before. God was doing a new thing, and God is doing a new thing today as well. Just like Nicodemus God is calling us to step out in faith and be born again.

So what does Jesus mean to be born again, to be born anew?

Well, Jesus said there were two parts of being born again.

To be born again is to be born of the water and born of the spirit.

In order to be spiritually alive we must be cleansed by the waters of God.

We know the power of Baptism for through it we receive forgiveness of our sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, but we need to experience that cleansing each and every day. Because of our sinful nature we need to constantly be washed of our sins, we are forever in need of God's cleansing waters.

Have you had one of those days recently when everything goes wrong? Like when the alarm doesn't go off, and you wake up late, so you yell at your son or daughter to get going, as if it's her fault, you storm around the house so worked up that you can't find any clothes to wear, you blame your spouse for not having milk in the fridge for your cereal, you yell at the dog who promptly gets nervous making another mess to clean up, and by the time everyone is out of the house and off to start their day, you've managed to upset your whole household and start your day feeling miserable, all in less than an hour.

By nature, we are unclean. By nature, we get stressed out. By nature we do all kinds of dumb things. We constantly need our sinful lives washed clean with the cleansing waters of God's forgiveness. And when we repent, when we turn to God and give up our weaknesses to him in prayer, we receive that forgiveness, and we are washed clean that we may begin anew.

But there is a second half to being born again. It means to be born of the spirit.

Many believe that this means having a religious experience that gives us a spiritual high. Like having religious champagne, where we become all spiritually bubbly inside. Many of us have had some incredible spiritual experiences, and they can be truly awesome! An inspirational service that touched your heart, a moving musical experience, a weekend retreat, a week at church camp, a spiritual relationship where you connected with someone in a fresh new way. They all can fill us with an unbelievable joy. And "knowing" that we are filled with the Holy Spirit is an experience we'll never forget. But just like bubbly champagne, today's religious experience, will be flat tomorrow.

Those mountain top experiences are awesome, they can be benchmarks in our lives, but Jesus is talking about something even more.

To be born of the spirit means to have the Spirit of Jesus Christ living inside us. It means that God's gracious love comes and lives inside our hearts, in our minds, in our hands, in our feet. It is a way of loving, a way of forgiving, a way of caring, a way of prayer, a way of worship, a way of thanksgiving and praise, a way of being in tune with the Spirit of Jesus. It is a way of loving another person in their uniqueness; no longer trying to change that person to meet our expectations but to truly love them in their individuality, rather than trying to remake them into the kind of person we want them to be. Gracious love is loving a person even in their sinfulness.

We all fall so far short of maturity and perfection, and in our ability to love a person, and that includes loving ourselves, in all our sinfulness. When we love unconditionally, that is grace. That is gracious love. That is the Spirit of Jesus. And to do that, to be born of the Spirit means we put all our faith in Jesus.

It's like the story of the tightrope walker who walked across Niagara Falls to the cheers of the crowd. After stunning them with his confident walking, he rode a bicycle across the rope and then he pushed a wheelbarrow across the great chasm. One little boy, overcome with amazement, said "Sir, you are the best tightrope walker in the world. I bet you could even push that wheelbarrow across your rope with someone in it." The tightrope walker turned toward him with a smile on his face and said, "well then, why don't you get in?"

To be born again, to be born of the spirit, is to have faith, to have the faith to get in the wheelbarrow with Jesus. To place all our eggs in the basket of God's Kingdom, and to live from this center, where our lives are filled with grace, love, and faith.

So like Nicodemus, let's try to look at life differently, let's change our way of thinking, and let's all let go of whatever may interfere, and let God lead our lives, and be born again. Amen.