

## Holy Envy Chapter 9: Born Again

“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?”  
—John 3:7-10

Taylor chooses this text for a baccalaureate address as a piece of “distinctly Christian wisdom” to demonstrate that it was possible to speak from her own Christian tradition “without sounding triumphal or exclusive.”

This story of Jesus and Nicodemus appears only in John’s Gospel and is often told as a story about the inability of Nicodemus “to grasp the truth that Jesus reveals to him about the Kingdom of God.”

She notes that Nicodemus leads with praise, “Rabbi, we know that you are a n their from the presence of God.” She emphasizes this because the story has evoked so much anti-Jewish teaching over the years. She wants her readers to set this aside long enough “to listen in on a very important conversation between two rabbis about the way of life.”

In her reading of the story, the response of Jesus is to let Nicodemus know “that he does not know the first thing about who has come from God and who has not. He cannot see one millimeter into God’s kingdom.” Rather than rebuking him, Taylor wonders if the purpose of Jesus is “not to enlighten Nicodemus but to endarken him, establishing the limits of what humans can know about God and what we cannot?” Nicodemus say to Jesus “We know,” Jesus responds, “You do not know.”

However, the point of this from Taylor’s perspective is not to judge Nicodemus for his lack of knowledge but to suggest to him that his problem is that he thinks he *ought* to about the Kingdom of God. Jesus statement about the wind is one of fact, not judgement. Jesus say this is the way with *everyone* who is born of the Spirit. “The only thing that sets Nicodemus apart is that he is so uncomfortable with his unknowing. His problem is that he thinks he *ought* to know.”

“This is difficult teaching for those who want to feel secure in their relationship with God, especially if their security depends on knowing how things work.”

Jesus response to Nicodemus is not, you do not know “because you are stupid, but because you are not God. So relax if you can, because you are not doing anything wrong. This is what it means to be human.”

“The story of Jesus and Nicodemus freed me from believing I had to know the answer to every question about what it means to be Christian...I could also stop worrying about whether I was Christian enough to stay in the room with Jesus. Thanks to his conversation with Nicodemus, I gained new respect for what it means to be *agnostic*—such a maligned word, so often used to mean distrustful or lackadaisical, when all it really means is that *you do not know*, which according to Jesus is true of everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

“The greatest gift of my second birth, however, was being reunited with my birth mother—not the first one, who bore me in the labor and delivery suite at Lafayette Home Hospital in Lafayette, Indiana—but the second one, who bore me from above.” The Holy Spirit. *Her*.

“Even if Christian will not go higher than three, the case is made: unity expresses itself in diversity. The one who comes to us in more than one way is free to surprise us in all kinds of ways.” Just like the wind that blows where it will.

Our “best ways of thinking and speaking about God are provisional. They are always in process—reflecting our limited perspectives, responding to our particular lives and times, relating us to our ancestors in the faith even as they flow out toward the God who remains free to act in ways that confound us. If our ways of thinking and speaking about God are not at least that fluid, then they are not really theologies but *theolatries*—things we worship instead of God, because we cannot get God to hold still long enough to pin God down.”

“Lately I have begun to notice how my holy envy of friends in other traditions [Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim] moves the circle back to me.” In many ways, Taylor notes that she learns “positive things about my tradition from people who do not belong to it, which triples the value of their praise...When I consider their gifts to me, I decide that being born again is looking for ways to return the favor, like the imam who sent my students away with the express wish that they could be the best Christians, the best Jews, the best human beings they could be. Once you have given up knowing who is right, it is easy to see neighbors everywhere you look.

## Questions for Discussion

In Taylor's rereading of the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the night (pp. 163–68), being "born again" means acknowledging all that you don't know about God and being freed by that unknowing. Are there things you were once certain of that you don't know about anymore? How does Taylor's understanding of being "born again" compare to yours?

Taylor suggests we should keep our ways of thinking and speaking of God fluid, lest our theologies become "theolatries—things we worship instead of God, because we cannot get God to hold still long enough to pin God down" (p. 171). How important is orthodoxy (correct theology) to you?

Though Taylor has moved away from the traditional center of Christianity, she has learned from friends in other religions to see the good in her tradition (pp. 171–73). If you have experienced a similar shift in your religious perspective, what new views do you have of your tradition?