

## “The Nicodemus Tension”

LaPorte New Church Swedenborgian

Rev. Kit B. Billings, M.Div, MA

June 12, 2022

### **Scriptures**

Psalm 127:1-2

John 3:1-15

### **Hymns/Songs**

“As the Deer Panteth”

"Breathe On Me" 603

"On Eagle's Wings"

### **Psalm 127:1-2**

<sup>1</sup>Unless the LORD builds the house,  
those who build it labor in vain.

Unless the LORD watches over the city,  
the watchman stays awake in vain.

<sup>2</sup>It is in vain that you rise up early  
and go late to rest,  
eating the bread of anxious toil;  
for he gives to his beloved sleep.

### **John 3:1-15**

#### ***You Must Be Born from Above***

**3** Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. **2** This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” **3** Jesus answered him, “**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.**” **4** Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” **5** Jesus answered, “**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.** **6** That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7** Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ **8** The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

**9** Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” **10** Jesus answered him, “**Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?** **11** Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear

witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

### **Insight for Worship**

*Secrets of Heaven* 6144 by Emanuel Swedenborg

Moreover by means of spiritual desolations and temptation struggles, states contrary to heavenly life are felt, the result of which is the implantation of a sense and perception of the satisfaction and happiness of heavenly life. This is because a sense and perception of what is satisfying and happy is impossible without comparison with the opposites.

**SERMON:** “The Nicodemus Tension” by Rev. Kit B. Billings

How many times in your life have you found yourself caught up in the middle of your own growth process, where you feel part of yourself strongly pulled in one direction, and another significant part of yourself feeling pulled in an opposite direction?

This morning we are looking in on the life of a special man named Nicodemus, who also found himself under serious spiritual tension long ago, when he let himself be deeply moved by an itinerant, rebel preacher named Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, one of the 70 elite religious leaders and teachers in Jerusalem who made up the Sanhedrin during the three years that the Lord lived. And so, Nicodemus was there, in the thick of it all, and he was there during the Lord’s final hours—when He was arrested, tried and condemned by the Sanhedrin. But our amazing true-to-life story in John’s Gospel this morning shows us that our friend, Nicodemus, was one of the few exceptionally elite Pharisees, who actually loved and believed in Jesus as his Messiah. But, Nicodemus was a regular person too, struggling to spiritually learn and grow, just like you and me, **who found himself caught up right in the middle of himself**, feeling pulled in two directions at the same time, which means he was feeling immense TENSION inside, while his own spiritual regeneration processes were happening.

But first, let me share with you an example within the sports world when I found myself caught up smack dab in the middle of different values and thoughts inside of myself, where my growth and development were concerned. My example comes from

many years of seriously not liking the Boston Celtics. Why was this? Well, simply because ever since I was 13 yrs. old, I have been a diehard L.A. Lakers fan. I fell in love with the Lakers back when Magic Johnson and Kareem Abdul Jabbar were at their best, which was the same time when Magic and Larry Bird were rookies and coming into their greatness as NBA basketball players. And as you may know, both the Lakers and Celtic squads were fabulous teams—but I was a fan of the showtime Lakers, the run and gunners, the fast-paced Lakers who dazzled us with their athleticism, when Kareem was swinging his awesome skyhook, which was unstoppable. **And the Lakers and Celtics went at it big time!** So, as you can imagine, it was easy for me to develop a strong distaste for those leprechaun-loving Celtics. And I felt totally justified inside of myself for basically hating the Celtics, who I saw as overly physical and dirty players.

So now, fast-forward into my mid-40s, when my own spiritual regeneration was really going places, and therefore my love and appreciation for all of the nuances for how to play basketball at its very best were reaching new heights inside of myself. So, I loved on my days off just watching all kinds of YouTube videos, about the great teams and players of “my era,” in the 1980s and 1990s. And low and behold, something began happening inside of me that years ago would have been totally impossible! I began, VERY SLOWLY MIND YOU, to more and more appreciate how amazing and great Larry Bird, Kevin McHale, Robert Parish and other standout Celtics players were back then, who I once loathed with a passion. My affection for them wound up growing so much, that I allowed myself to begin to like and enjoy the Boston Celtics team and franchise as a whole. And now, today, believe it or not, I am now fervently rooting for the guys in the green and white, hoping they can again win the NBA Championship, if they can take it to the Warriors and win the best of 7 games. **But I will never forget the glorious tension I felt for around two years in my mid-40s,** as this deeper, more spiritual part of me was rising up into yet another area of prominence within me—which was able to have mercy for Larry Bird’s Celtics, able to appreciate their fabulous skills and amazing work ethic. In short, I began perceiving that it was foolish of me to hate or dislike that great team—because, in their own way, they were great.

And so, eventually, after more and more of God’s Love and a higher degree of thinking melted their way into my connection with the Celtics, the tension within me began to give way, while the spiritual parts of me kept growing! **But all of that extremely important internal tension within me, had been very important.** Can you see why? It’s because all throughout our lives, while we continue learning, growing and regenerating by the power of Divine Love and Truth taking deeper root within us, there is this incredibly important **TENSION** we all learn to live with, and even come to trust.

**Think about it: tension exists when we become aware of the difference between where we *are spiritually* and where we could be; or from where we want to be or ought to be, from where we really are today.** Tension often results from the inner battle we experience between our world's natural and cultural values and those of God's Word.

There are many forms of tension, aren't there?

- Such as, when learning a new job, there's the tension of trying to master new knowledge and skills and being highly productive as well.
- Or when we are waiting for our children to grow up and engage their higher degrees of humanness, and then slowly seeing it unfold!
- Or, when abstaining: tension is the result of something that you want badly, but to get there you must change your eating or your spending habits—in order to have the physical health or financial security you want.

I have found that it is easy for me to feel frustrated with myself, because of seeing the difference between where I want to be spiritually and where I am at today. **But it helps me to realize that the Bible is one very tension-filled book!** If there's a book that thrives on tension, it is the Bible. It is full of people examining their current state and wondering when it is going to change. For example, think about the ancient Israelites taken captive who were stuck in Babylon...for 70 years no less, even though they knew they belonged in Israel. **The Bible is full of anxious waiting and reflection.** But there is one example in particular that I want to focus on and use as a model, Nicodemus.

It's true that Nicodemus, by virtue of being a Pharisee, was influential politically, socially and perhaps even economically. Nicodemus would also have been extremely well educated—and most of the peasant Jewish population back then couldn't even write their own names. The combination of these, his political power, his social standing, and his economic security, combined with his education and piety, would have made Nicodemus a very elite person, the kind of person you would let ahead of you in line, or would step aside for in a crowd so that he could pass.

What an enviable kind of life to have, right? But then, something profound began unfolding inside of Nicodemus. It was something so wonderful and precious, that he realized it was time for him to risk his entire professional career to pursue. Nicodemus saw and experienced the divinely-human ministry of Jesus Christ, and it

shook him so beautifully and deeply that he was willing to lose his secure life over it. And for perhaps weeks and months, Nicodemus found himself in a lot of tension. Christ had spent a lot of time in Jerusalem, and His reputation preceded Him. Most of the Sanhedrin Pharisees who saw the Lord's miracles or heard Him preaching, witnessing how Jesus kept on breaking traditional man-made laws within their Mishnah, developed very hardened hearts and then plotted how to kill the Lord. But, there were those few Pharisees who were not only intrigued but also inspired by Christ, and they believed that He was sent into the world by God Himself.

And then, the Lord began teaching him the deepest truths he had ever heard, about what it REALLY TAKES for anyone to grow with Heave-itself inside of us---a truly lasting, albeit very gradual, kind of spiritual development and regeneration, whose best image is found within the gestation and birthing process of a human baby! **Our gestation inside of the womb takes a long time and during it we go through many important stages of growth.**

John the Baptist had said, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He that cometh after me ... shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire." The baptism with water represents reformation—the cleansing of our outward conduct by means of truth from the Word. The baptism with the Holy Ghost and with fire is the coming into our minds and hearts of the Lord's truth and unselfish love as we try to drive out false thoughts and evil desires. This is glorious, gradual and saving spiritual regeneration. A synonym for lifelong spiritual regeneration is "rebirth," a spiritually powerful transformation process that flows down into us from "above," from God's Being into our finite humanness. Nicodemus heard and loved what Christ taught him that night, which led him to try to defend the Lord during His Sanhedrin trial. And then, seeing that Jesus' crucifixion was at hand, Nicodemus then bought the burial ground where His dead body was laid, and he followed this by "bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight," which was a very expensive gift to be sure. (John 19:39)

In conclusion, Nicodemus reminds us that no matter what our background is, we like him are often in the middle between heavenly and hellish influences within us, as love and selfishness vie for dominance, because like him we are here to find our Lord and Savior for ourselves, to be highly teachable and humble, and to feel and know that Christ's love and truth are by far the most important gift we are given! Indeed, no matter the cost to us personally, we were born to follow our Lord and Savior every day of our lives—no matter how much tension we must suffer while doing so. And we can trust with all that we are, that as we put aside our selfishness and dark ways of thinking, our Savior flows through us, like the wind blowing through the trees in Summer—and gradually, this amazingly wonderful regeneration process takes hold in us too....forever!

Amen.