

"Born Again / Born from Above"

1. Growing up, I was not familiar with the phrase "Sitting on the fence" until I learned English in high school
 - a. I didn't know it because we don't have a similar phrase in Spanish, though obviously we know the concept of being indecisive
 - b. In some way, though, the phrase is more than just about indecision, but actually it can mean that the person has the needed knowledge but lacks the courage to make the needed decision.
 - c. Sitting on the fence, then, as a statement of neutrality seems more appealing to that individual than taking the consequences of choosing sides.
 - d. I texted my siblings on our family chat to ask if there was a similar Spanish phrase which conveyed a similar concept, and they all agreed on this phrase which includes a fence, sort of: "Watching the bullfight from behind the safety barrier" (*ver los toros desde la barrera*).
 - e. That phrase might show more of an active decision, you might argue:
 - i. Someone on the fence doesn't want to make a decision, and is trying to stay above it all, stay out of the fray
 - ii. Someone watching the action from behind the safety barrier (or staying on the sidelines, if you like) is actively choosing a side.
 - iii. They made their decision, and they're staying on that side of the fence.
2. In our passage today, Nicodemus represents a part of Jesus' audience, someone who was sitting on the fence about Jesus
 - a. We know a little bit about Nicodemus. He's only mentioned in this gospel
 - i. He was a Pharisee who was familiar with Jesus, who had seen him perform or heard of some of his miraculous signs
 - ii. Several chapters later Nicodemus stands up for Jesus in a meeting with other religious leaders, who then ridicule him (What? Do you follow that guy?)
 - iii. And then after Jesus dies, he helps claim Jesus' body and give it a proper burial
 - b. In this first scene, Nicodemus comes at night, which already tells you something is up
 - i. Night and day, secret and open, were symbols Jesus used to make his point
 - ii. Coming at night means that Nicodemus didn't want to be seen by others, or even that Nicodemus didn't fully see the light that Jesus shined
 - c. In a dialogue that sounds like they're talking past each other, Jesus is actually trying to get Nicodemus to make the decision to follow Jesus, to get off the fence
 - i. You need to look at it from a different perspective, Nicodemus. You need a brand new start
 1. Here Jesus says we need to be born from above (which can also be translated born again)
 2. Nicodemus thinks of it as an anatomy lesson, but Jesus says it is a spiritual, theological lesson
 - ii. Jesus says something which is often memorized and repeated: "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.”

- d. Get off the fence, Nicodemus. Follow me...
3. There are things which we don't get to sit on the fence about, certainly not once we've seen things clearly in the light of day.
 - a. As a way to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. last week (since the local celebrations were postponed) I watched a documentary about him and reread his famous letter from jail.
 - b. Martin Luther King Jr., in his letter from a Birmingham Jail, goes after a group of folks who were sitting on the fence.
 - c. King had gone to Birmingham in April 1963 to press the cause of desegregation. He was jailed for his non-violent direct action. And while in jail responds to a letter from religious leaders who took issue with the marches and sit ins, arguing that King was being radical, that his action (peacefully marching, civil disobedience) was the reason for the violence (from the segregationist police)
 - d. In one paragraph in this amazing letter, King writes to those critics:
 - e. *<<I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in [their] stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes [they] can set the timetable for another [person's] freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.>>*
https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html
 4. As a church, following God, led by our session and through the work of very faithful people, First Presbyterian has taken an active role in matters of social justice.
 - a. There have been times when we've sat on the fence, and times when we've gotten off the fence and not only called out injustice, but worked for justice.
 - b. But those instances have not be easy; they have had a cost.
 - c. I like telling the story of J. Irwin Miller and Dr. Bill Laws joining forces to speak out against the injustices suffered by African Americans who were facing barriers to purchasing homes here in Columbus in the 1970s.
 - d. That took both courage and decisiveness, and I am certain they faced severe criticism.
 - e. Currently we as a congregation are engaging in serious conversation and seeking equally serious action as it relates to being a Matthew 25 congregation.
 - i. As a reminder, that is an initiative of the PCUSA inviting churches to live out the meaning of the parable in that passage (I was hungry and you gave me food, I was in prison and you visited me) focusing on three distinct areas

1. Church vitality
2. Dismantling structural racism
3. Eradicating systemic poverty
- ii. Systemic and structural issues are difficult to identify, let alone tackle, but I believe that once they become evident, it is no longer possible to sit on the fence as though we didn't know what the right decision was
- iii. Last week we heard a compelling story from Matt Souza, who saw the systemic injustice suffered by undocumented immigrants and he got off the fence and acted to offer scholarships for them to go to college (and works behind the scenes as well to break down the system that perpetuates the injustice)
 1. We can't stay on the fence now, not now that we know about it.
 2. And if we're now on the side of repairing an injustice against an undocumented child, what else are we ready to do?
- iv. This week we begin a small group study on the book "How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America" by Clint Smith
 1. Just over 40 people will be participating on zoom as part of several groups to discuss four chapters in the book.
 2. There we will read things that are upsetting, both about the terrible reality lived by people under slavery, and the very real and present vestiges which continue a structure that favors white over black, that glamorizes a period that wasn't glamorous or just, and that punishes those who dare shine a light on the historical facts.
 3. It will be hard to stay on the fence once we read it.
 4. Not that people won't try. A respected Columbus resident gifted me a half a dozen books he had read which basically make the case that racism is not real.
5. It's not easy getting off the fence, coming on the side where Jesus is calling us to follow against injustice and dehumanization. There are systemic pressures to keep things as they are, to keep people uninformed and inactive. But that's not the Jesus way, who calls us to shine a bright light on the spiritual truths of God's love for all people, and then to act decisively with Jesus for love and justice.

Sources: https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

Reflection questions

1. Share a story about a time you "sat on the fence" about an important decision. What were the forces making it hard to make a decision?
2. What did Nicodemus want from the conversation with Jesus (John 3:1-21) and what did Jesus want from it?
3. In your journey to fight injustice, what were things that once seen could not be unseen? And how does that knowledge compel people to get off the fence and act?