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[intro music]

Brian: Welcome to the Queer Theology podcast!

Fr. Shay: Where each episode, we take a queer look at the week's lectionary readings. We're the cofounders of QueerTheology.com and the hosts for this podcast. I'm Father Shay Kearns —

B: And I'm Brian G. Murphy.

FS: This week we're taking a look at the lectionary text for May 27th. It's from John 3:1-17. It's kind of long, so we're not going to read it today, but it's the story of Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee; he comes to Jesus at night and talks to him. We're going to dive into this passage in just a minute. But we wanted to let you know that we have this online community called Sanctuary Collective where we dive deep into passages like this all the time, and we just want to make sure that you know about that. If you want to join in and be a part of conversations like this, you can do that. You can go to our website, QueerTheology.com/sanctuarycollective, and join in to that community. It's a really great space of people who are living life together and talking about things like how we can bring our queerness and transness to bear on scripture, and that's really exciting.

So, this week we're looking at this Jesus and Nicodemus text.

[not read aloud]

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.” [NRSV]

Brian, what do you do with this story?

B: You know, right off the bat in verse three, Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” [Brian is using the NIV translation.] Immediately, my spidey senses get all tingly. ‘Born again’ has become such a loaded phrase in our culture today. A lot of folks – a lot of [grinning] born-again Christians – point to this passage. But Jesus, in this passage, doesn’t say, like, “To be born again, you have to say the sinner’s prayer and accept me into your heart,” [laughs] “and then you get to go into heaven after

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you die,” right? He goes on to say, you have to be born again of water and spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit. He’s a little bit vague about exactly what it means to be born again. He doesn’t exactly lay that out. We look to other parts of scripture, the totality of scripture, to see what might be going on there.

Another sort of tingly thing that goes off is, in Matthew, Jesus says it’s easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God’s kingdom. I think that Jesus is, throughout his ministry, making these bold, declarative statements. Each time he is speaking to a particular audience about a particular topic, and giving the word that that particular audience needs to hear. I think that there is something about the love of money and the hoarding of money being incompatible about God’s kingdom, but we often don’t hear Christians saying, “Well, you’re not really a Christian unless you give away all your money,” or unless you’re not rich, right? But we do hear Christians say, “You’re not really a Christian unless you become born again by asking Jesus into your heart.”

I think it’s really important that, when folks start to define what is Christian or what is not Christian, what it means to be a Christ follower, that we don’t sort of take for granted that what the Religious Right says is the ‘right’ way to be a Christian is the right way. That Queer people aren’t heretics. That the Religious Right, evangelical Christianity, conservative Christianity, isn’t always consistently Biblical in their understanding of Christianity. I am sort of a nerd about noticing, either where the Bible contradicts itself or where Christian theology contradicts itself, so those two parallels come up for me. What about you, Shay? What comes up for you in this passage?

FS: I think for me, the verses that really jump out are, you know, the famous John 3:16 – “God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life.” Which, like you said, very much goes into this idea that the way to be a Christian is to believe in Jesus, and that that’s what gets you into heaven, and that that’s the whole point. But I have always, even since I was a kid, found it strange that verse seventeen never kind of gets into that picture. “God didn’t send his son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” I think that – first of all, when scripture was written, there wasn’t this sense of chapters and verses, right? That is a convention that is modern and that I think has done a lot of damage, especially in situations like this. John 3:16 is not a complete thought. The complete thought is the whole thing. We have to take into account verse seventeen.

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And I think, like you said, this idea of ‘what does it mean to enter the kingdom of God; what *is* the kingdom of God?’ I would ask that same question of, what does the world being saved *look* like? To me, it’s really interesting that this verse says ‘the world.’ It doesn’t say, “God didn’t send his son into the world to judge the world, but that some people who believed in Jesus (like it says in the first verse) will get to heaven when they die.” It’s this idea that something that is happening in Jesus’s life and ministry, and we would say, knowing the end of the story, his death and resurrection, is salvific for the entire cosmos. Not just the people of the world, the cosmos in its entirety.

A really helpful book for me in reading that was N.T. Wright’s book *Surprised by Hope*, which talks about what it could mean for the entire world to be saved. It’s this really beautiful vision that all things are being redeemed by Jesus’s life, death and resurrection. Us being a part of the kingdom of God means that we get to play a part in that salvific work. I think that that’s really beautiful.

And I think, for me to read these texts this way is so much more hopeful and beautiful and helpful than, ‘say a prayer and you’ve got your fire insurance.’ That’s not an inspiring viewpoint for me anymore.

B: Right. And you know, when we talk about the kingdom of God – in Luke 17, Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God and says, “Don’t you see, God’s kingdom is already among you!” In popular parlance, the kingdom of God is sometimes substituted for, ‘after you die, you go to heaven.’ But we see, in other parts of scripture, Jesus talking about the kingdom of God. In the Lord’s prayer, the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Here in Luke, the kingdom of God is already among you. There’s something about here and now that matters and that is important. Eternal life isn’t just found after you die, but eternal life and the kingdom of God are found in the here and now. For those of us who choose it, in following the way of Jesus, something transformative happens in our lives that lets us in to and lets us experience a bit of the kingdom of God. That’s not quite yet all the way here [laughs] but we can sort of tap into something. I think that, for queer people, rather than getting in the way of our accessing the kingdom of God, our queerness is one of the keys that helps to unlock the kingdom of God within us and amongst us. And so, I’m so over the moon that I’m queer. It’s enriched my faith.

Like Shay said in the beginning, if you want to explore more about how your queerness, or the queerness of your friends and church colleagues, might unlock the kingdom of God for you, we would love you inside of Sanctuary Collective to learn more about how to read the Bible queerly and to be in community with

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queer Christians and straight cisgender supporters around the world. There's just over a hundred folks in there, and it's a really cool community. We would love to welcome you in there. Head on over to QueerTheology.com/sanctuarycollective to dive in and queer scripture with us.

[outro music]

B: The Queer Theology podcast is just one of many things that we do at QueerTheology.com, which provides resources, community and inspiration for LGBTQ Christians and straight cisgender supporters.

FS: To dive into more of the action, visit us at QueerTheology.com. You can also connect with us online on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram.

B: We'll see you next week.

PODCAST END

Transcript by Taylor Walker