

When We Don't Know as Much as We Think

A Sermon for Every Sunday

Lent 2A

John 3:1-16

As we move with Jesus through the Gospel of John we meet a wide array of memorable characters – the woman at the well, the disciples James and John, Mary and Martha, Jesus' good friend Lazarus. Some of these folks are not only memorable but also likeable. Who doesn't enjoy the sisters, Mary and Martha with their different responses to Jesus? I particularly enjoy Martha who is close enough to Jesus to be able to give him a piece of her mind when he shows up three days late to save her brother Lazarus (John 11:21)?

Today we've got a memorable exchange with a man whom I've never warmed up to. I've never cared for him; perhaps because I'm more like Nicodemus than I'd like to admit.

"Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council." Nicodemus is introduced to us as an important, powerful person. We are told nothing about him except for his resume as a member of the "ruling council." Notably, "He came to Jesus at night." Remember, this was before the days of electric lighting. It's dark, very dark.

Why didn't Nicodemus show up for one of Jesus' teaching sessions in broad daylight? I wonder if it was because he was embarrassed to be seen with Jesus. He's an important religious leader. He can't be seen as groveling before this country preacher. As a powerful person with authority, he is somebody in the know.

I think he's not coming to learn from Jesus, in his nocturnal, secret visit. He's there to show off what he knows before Jesus. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God." See? "We know."

Then he flatters Jesus with, "For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." I guess that he expects Jesus to be flattered that he, powerful and informed person as he is, has judged Jesus to be a "teacher who has come from God."

Jesus isn't buying. "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

Smart, informed, influential Nicodemus, in just a couple of minutes of conversation with Jesus, is thoroughly baffled. "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Nicodemus' question goes unanswered. "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'"

Which means?

“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus now speaks for us all: “How can this be?” Mr. Religious Leader, Mr. Knowledgeable and Well-Informed Nicodemus is suddenly the clueless, befuddled Freshman.

Jesus almost mocks Nicodemus’ confusion: “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?”

And if that’s not enough to knock Nicodemus down a notch or two, Jesus adds an even more strange note: “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

An obscure episode from the Exodus where Moses lifts up a snake on a stick in the wilderness to cure the Hebrew children of their snakebites, the “Son of Man” “lifted up,” (we know it’s an allusion to the cross, but how would Nicodemus know that?) I don’t know if Jesus is intentionally trying to make this oh-so-smart ruler, teacher, nocturnal questioner Nicodemus look clueless or not. But that’s how he looks. In just a few moments of conversation, power has shifted from the one who claims “we know” to Jesus as the knowing, self-confident person asks, “How can this be?”

And maybe some of you can identify the Nicodemus. Any of you know what it’s like to sneak into a secret conversation with Jesus, ask him some questions, do your best to understand him, but still come away clueless? Anybody here know what it’s like to have a sure, firm grasp upon who Jesus is and what he’s up to (“Now we know.”) only to discover that you don’t have the foggiest idea of what he is talking about (“How can this be?”)?

Perhaps your encounters with our Lord have not been as dramatic as Nicodemus’ with Jesus. And yet, is there no part of us who has not felt that we are intellectually, spiritually, maybe morally inadequate to be in conversation with Jesus?

I know someone who “gave my life to Christ” when she was a teenager. Then her faith was vibrant and strong. Now that she’s a young adult, she’s not so sure. Her once firm faith has been shaken by what she learned in college, by what she has experienced in life.

I know someone who made a vow to the Lord to live a righteous, moral life. He was in charge of his feelings, his actions. Yet he found that in certain situations, he was not as strong willed as he first thought. There are things that he promised he would not do, he has done. As it turns out, life has revealed that he is not half as strong, morally speaking, as he first thought.

I know someone who has sincerely tried to believe. She has attended church regularly and has paid attention to the sermons. She even signed up and faithfully participated in a Bible study

group at church. But still, she's not sure. She wants to believe, but she just can't. She feels like a failure. A flop at faith. What about her?

What about her and all the others who have failed to think, feel, believe, or act in the right way about Jesus? What about you in your own shortcomings with faith?

That's where I want you listen to what Jesus said to Nicodemus. Did you hear it when the gospel was read? It's a word that I think lots of people I know need to hear. It's the word that characterizes everything Jesus is and all that he intends for you and the world:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

For God so loved. Loved the world. That God gave. That whoever believes should not perish. Not to condemn but to save.

There is much that Nicodemus did not understand. His posturing and preening before Jesus didn't work. He is not as much in the know or in charge as he thinks he is. And yet, knowing, understanding, being in charge is all quite beside the point. What is the point? Jesus gives answer: For God so loved. Loved the world. That God gave. That whoever believes should not perish. Not to condemn but to save.

The first Bible verse I learned by heart was from today's gospel. John 3:16. The way I learned it by heart when I was eight years old: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.* I doubt that I had much understanding of many of those big words. But the one thing I did understand is the most important: *God so loved the world.*

When it comes down to it, for Nicodemus, for me, for you, that's all that matters. Not to condemn but to save. For today, for all eternity, this is knowledge enough.

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