

Trinity Sunday B 2021 Sermon

John 3:1-17

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.

In the Scripture passage we just heard, the Gospel-writer John tells us that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to Jesus *by night*. In John's deeply symbolic Gospel, the nighttime darkness is a tip-off to us readers that Nicodemus is "in the dare," and is not going to understand what Jesus says. (Contrast this with the story in the next chapter of John's Gospel, where the Samaritan woman at the well meets Jesus in the noonday sun, and she **does** understand.)

Now, Nicodemus is an unusual character in John's Gospel story. New Testament scholar David Lose points out that Nicodemus "is the only ... [man who is *not* one of Jesus' 12 Disciples]... who shows up at multiple points in John's Gospel and grows in his faith."¹ In *today's* Gospel, Nicodemus appears for the *first* time, and he is confused and clueless; he doesn't even *begin* to understand Jesus' words.

The *second* time Nicodemus appears in John's Gospel (Chapter 7), Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem on the Temple grounds, and Jesus' teachings are

causing some stir among the people. The chief priests and Pharisees send the Temple police to arrest him; but Nicodemus, who is **one** of those Pharisees, disagrees with this action. He says to his fellow Pharisees, “Our Law doesn’t judge someone without first hearing him and learning what he is doing, does it?” (John 7:51, CEB) Nicodemus is telling his fellow Pharisees that this man Jesus is someone who deserves to be heard. But his fellow Pharisees rebuke Nicodemus. Nicodemus is beginning to take chances on behalf of Jesus, risking his place in the normal cultural and religious systems in which he has been comfortably situated, *probably* for his whole adult life to that point.

Nicodemus’ *final* appearance in John’s Gospel occurs immediately following Jesus’ crucifixion. He, along with Joseph of Arimathea, goes to ask Pontius Pilate if they could take the body of Jesus for burial. This is an *especially* risky thing to do, since it associates Joseph and Nicodemus *closely* with Jesus, who had caused **such** a furor amongst the people that Pilate had no choice but to order that Jesus be crucified. In coming to Pilate and asking for Jesus’ body, Nicodemus has *really* stuck his neck out on behalf of Jesus – and, he has probably cut himself off entirely from his fellow Pharisees and other Jewish leaders, who had handed Jesus over to Pilate in the first place.

And John, in *telling* the story of Nicodemus going to Pilate to claim Jesus’ body, John again uses language that is deeply symbolic. We are told that Nicodemus brought with him spices to anoint Jesus’ body, “a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.” (John 19:39, NRSV) *A hundred pounds* of spices to anoint Jesus’ body? Clearly, the highly-exaggerated amount is symbolic of the degree to which Nicodemus’ is now giving himself to Jesus. John Shea suggests that, with this extraordinarily generous gift, “Nicodemus begin[s] the full-fledged following of Jesus.”²

Highly-educated Pharisee that he is, Nicodemus first came to Jesus seeking to *understand* God, which is what we in the kingdom of *this* world, we who live our lives so much in our minds, tend to strive for: to **understand**. But, in the Book of Proverbs, we are told, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding” [Proverbs 3:5]. Author Brian McClaren puts it this way: “there’s a difference between trusting God and trusting my understanding of God.”³ This is Nicodemus’ problem when he first comes to Jesus: he wants to understand, but all he gets from Jesus are words that make no sense to his rational mind. Yet, Nicodemus does not quit. He comes coming back to Jesus. And from his first, confusing and clueless encounter with Jesus to his last encounter, when he comes to claim Jesus’ body, Nicodemus grows in his faith in, and commitment to, Christ.

My friends, what if our goal, as Christians, is not to learn *about* God, to understand God, as if God were some fixed, immutable entity “out there” or “up there”? What if the reason that Jesus’ words to Nicodemus are so confusing and mind-boggling is because God the Holy Trinity cannot be understood with our

minds, but only experienced with our heart and soul and spirit? God is not “up there” or “out there.” God is in here and everywhere, alive and dynamic, diverse and unique Persons pouring themselves out into each other and fully receiving the Gift of each other, so lovingly related that they are One. And this sacred dance of mutual self-giving and receiving is not only the Life-force at the heart of the *Godhead*; it is the Life-force at the heart of humanity, we who were created in the image and likeness of this dynamic, Trinitarian God. And, as Nicodemus discovered, this is not a Truth which can be grasped with our understanding; it is the Divine Flow of Life and Love which we are being called to join, in which we are called to live, in which we find our True Selves.

“[N]o one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” Jesus tells Nicodemus – and us. Jesus is not calling Nicodemus to understand some hidden truth. He is calling him – and us – to be reborn into an entirely **new** kingdom which cannot be grasped with the rational mind. He is calling us into a kingdom in which there is a different way of seeing and perceiving, a different system of values, a different orientation to life, and a different source from whence we draw our life-blood. He is calling Nicodemus – and us – to bring our hundred pounds of spices, the entirety of our lives, lay it all at the feet of our crucified and risen Lord, and enter into the Divine flow of Life which is at the very heart of God, the Holy Trinity.

AMEN

1 David Lose, *Dear Partner in Preaching*, “Trinity B: The Patron Saint of Curious Christians,” <http://www.davidlose.net/2021/05/trinity-b-the-patron-saint-of-curious-christians/>

2 John Shea, *Following the Love into Mystery*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010, p. 143

3 Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation, Thursday, February 4, 2021, “Lean Not on Your Own Understanding” <https://cac.org/lean-not-on-your-own-understanding-2021-02-04/>