

There's a lot going on in today's reading from John's Gospel. And I mean A LOT! We have a pharisee coming to Jesus at night, images of water and wind, serpents in the wilderness, and the famous verse we see at almost any and every sporting event.

Today, I want to briefly first address that one verse that most all Christians know and a lot of us by heart. From there I want to look at a character that we all may know as well, a man named Nicodemus.

Read John 3:1-17

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." Luther called this verse "the gospel in a nutshell" and it has served that way for so many of our people, signaling God's profound love for us and indicating the depths to which God would go to convey that love. It too, however, has sometimes served as a wedge between those who believe and are saved and those who do not and, some conclude, must therefore perish, and not have eternal life.

The 16<sup>th</sup> verse has been used as a wedge between the saved and the unsaved. This very familiar verse has been used to determine who is in and who is out, But....I don't think the passage is complete unless you read through verse 17: "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.

Reading just one more verse offers a larger context and indeed elaborates on the "motive" for God's sending of the Son. In particular, lest we be confused that God sends the Son out of love – which is of course where v. 16 begins – in verse 17, we hear the clear explanation, affirmation, and indeed repetition that the Son was not sent to condemn but to save. So,

maybe it's not about who's in and who's out, but rather about God's consistent intent to love, save, and bless the whole world. I suppose that could be the sermon for today and I'd be done. But you aren't that lucky.

The third chapter of John's gospel begins abruptly, introducing us to a new character named Nicodemus—a pharisee, we are told, and a member of the Jewish ruling council.

Nicodemus is intrigued by Jesus, but fears being publicly associated with him, and so he comes to meet with Jesus under the dark cover of night, when the other Jews-of-status are not likely to catch him in the act.

Scholars have written two things about why Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. For the religious leaders of the time, night was the time to study the law without being disturbed. And possibly, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night because he saw throughout the day Jesus was surrounded by crowds of people all the time. It may well be that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night because he wanted an absolutely private and completely undisturbed time with Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

A teacher in the Synagogue himself, Nicodemus can't afford to be seen fraternizing with Jesus, this rogue rabbi who has been developing quite a reputation for challenging the status quo, only the wedding at Cana precedes the protest scene in John's Gospel. And it is in response to this public protest—it would appear—that Nicodemus comes to see the new teacher in town.

Is this Jewish leader impressed with Jesus boldness? Taken in by the allure of his growing movement? Does he want to follow Jesus, like the others?

We never really get an answer ... possibly because Nicodemus doesn't come with a question, or even a request ... he comes full of knowledge; full of understanding.

"I've seen the evidence" he says, "I know who you are!"

Jesus cuts him off ... "let me stop you right there ... maybe it's time to re-examine your so-called "evidence" with new eyes. If you want to see the world that God is bringing forth, you have to be born anew ... or born again ... or born from above." The Greek word, *anōthen*, could mean any of those things, but, Nicodemus is certain that he knows which meaning Jesus intends: "*How can a man be born after having grown old?*" he retorts, assuming that "born again" is the clear meaning of Jesus words.<sup>2</sup>

Nicodemus takes this "born again" aspect literally, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

There certainly is conflict within Nicodemus' head about this whole concept. Perhaps he understands that Jesus is talking about a fundamental change, but he cannot wrap his mind around that. Perhaps he understands it is necessary, but it is physically impossible.

You can almost feel Jesus rolling his eyes from here.

"Born again" has been said many a time as a way of proclaiming our personal and eternal salvation, which we earned by believing the right doctrines about Jesus. But if we have not cast aside the earthly life that strives after things of the flesh in favor of an equally earthly life, but one concerned with the things of God's Spirit—then we have not seen the Kingdom that Jesus desires to show us.

Have you ever been in a class or a meeting with someone who thinks they know everything? A person who raises their hand not to inquire about that which they do not understand, but to impart their own expansive wisdom to the room? Nicodemus strikes me as such a character, arriving in the presence of this new teacher, and immediately telling Jesus what he knows.

Or perhaps, like a friend mentioned to me, we could compare Nicodemus to a know-it-all teenager and Jesus is his loving father patiently explaining that he/she does NOT in fact know everything.

The Christian life is not about knowledge, it is about love. It is about us becoming one with God as much as we can in our feeble state of being human.

What is fascinating to me about this passage, as it goes on, is that after having spoken of being born from above, Jesus says to Nicodemus, *“I’m talking about earthly things and you don’t understand? What’s going to happen when I start talking about heavenly things?”*

Did anyone one else do a double take when you heard that? I’ve heard this before, and most of the talk I’ve heard about being born again—or born from above—has to do with heaven. But Jesus says it has to do with earth.

*This* is why Jesus does what he does; indeed, it is his whole purpose on earth—that we might be one with God. But we do not arrive at this oneness by knowledge. Jesus is no more concerned with what we know than he was with what Nicodemus knew. Even more troubling for some of us—what we know is precisely what must be tossed out if we hope to see the kingdom of God.

The life that we have learned to master—the striving after material possessions; the incessant faith in competition, and lack of faith in cooperation; the individualism; assumption of self-made success, and its accompanying disdain for those who seek out help—all of this must come to a stop ... and a new life—the life from above—must begin at infancy.

It is the life that Nicodemus knows that keeps him from coming to Jesus in the daytime—and it is this life that blinds him to the new vision that Jesus offers all who come seeking—rather than possessing—understanding. Nicodemus knows how things work in the world. There are those who are with us and there are those who are against us.

Nicodemus has indeed seen this kind of thing before; he knows that the protestors don't fair well ... that the resistance movement is always put down by the powerful arm of authority ... and so he comes at night ... but he does come.

If we assume that the Jewish leader actually finds something compelling in Jesus—which is how I read this passage—then it is only the fear of downward mobility that keeps him from fully and openly embracing the life that Jesus has to offer.

Instead, Nicodemus wants to have his cake and eat it too—he wants the life of a disciple, but none of the social or political consequences that he knows come with it.

Whether Nicodemus could understand this or not, we do not know ... but we understand what it is for Jesus to be lifted up. For Jesus, to be lifted up is the ultimate downward mobility—but it is also the height of heavenly love: For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish—no matter where you stand on

the social/political ladder—but have eternal life. For unlike the powers of this world, the power of heaven does not come to condemn, but to save.

For my seminary theology course, we used a textbook by a professor from Princeton named Daniel Migliore. He wrote the book: “Faith Seeking Understanding.” Like Albert Einstein, who said “the more I know, the more I realize how much I don’t know,” Migliore has spent years chasing after the truth, and the climax of his learning is that God will always exceed our grasp ... we will never understand fully what it means that Jesus died for us ... that all of life is a gift ... that grace & justice can and do co-exist in him ... But neither can we ever stop seeking. We must, again and again be born into the mystery of God’s love for this world.<sup>3</sup>

1. William Barclay, The Gospel of John, Vol. 1
2. William Barclay, The Gospel of John, Vol. 1
3. Daniel Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology