

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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John 3:1-17 (NRSV)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. [2] 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." [3] Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." [4] 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?" [5] Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. [6] What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. [7] Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' [8] 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." [9] Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" [10] Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

[11] "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. [12] If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? [13] No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. [14] And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15] that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

[16] "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.

[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.

KNOWLEDGE VERSUS MYSTERY

Today is Trinity Sunday.

It's a tough day for preachers, especially those of us who think that it's our job to help you understand the Christian faith. Today we talk about a doctrine that is beyond our understanding. The one God revealed in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is the great mystery of the faith. And let's face it. Many of us are not good at mystery. We're good at knowing. We're good at explaining.

We're not so good at listening and accepting.

Nicodemus was like that. He was a highly educated sophisticated person. He was a take charge kind of guy. He was a leader.

Jesus called him a teacher of Israel. Some commentators think that he may have been a part of the Jewish ruling council called the Sanhedrin.

So when this religious leader came to Jesus at night, he was quick to tell Jesus what he thought he knew. That was his job. He said, "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God."

How many of us come to Jesus the same way? How many of us come to Jesus with our own notions about who he is and what he has come to do? We know Jesus.

Some of us have been studying Jesus from an early age. We should know something about Jesus. We should have a certain amount of expertise.

Like Nicodemus I'm supposed to be a religious expert. When people ask me questions about Jesus, I need to have answers. I know what Jesus taught and said. I know that he was a great teacher and a miracle worker. I know that Jesus was a man who revealed the very nature of God. Just ask me. I know.

But, like Nicodemus I also come to Jesus "in the dark." In some ways I come to Jesus unaware of what the kingdom of God is really about. I come to Jesus afraid of what others might say and do if I dared to really follow him. I come to Jesus surprisingly unqualified to teach God's people.

This is true not only of me, but of all of us. We know many things, but the more we get to know Jesus, the more we realize we don't know him.

What's our only hope for salvation? We need to be born again. We need to start all over at the beginning ... as if such a thing is possible.

FAITH IN THE WRONG JESUS

Let's begin our rebirthing process by taking another look at our lesson for today. We think that we really know this story. This encounter with Nicodemus is one of the most familiar stories in the New Testament. But, we really don't know the story as well as we might think.

The story begins not in chapter 3 where our lectionary lesson for today starts but in chapter 2, verses 23-25. In that passage we read that many people believed in Jesus, but Jesus did not believe in them! That sounds almost shocking. Why would Jesus reject these potential believers?

The Scripture tells us that Jesus knew what was in their hearts. Jesus knew that they believed in him only for the miracles. Their belief was not based upon an understanding of Jesus' message. Their belief was based upon a desire for power. Jesus had power, and they wanted it for their own lives.

Nicodemus is an example of these people who wanted a wonder working Messiah. What did Nicodemus know? He knew that Jesus was from God because he could do powerful miracles.

In that sense Nicodemus was a believer. Trouble was ... he believed in the wrong things. The miracles of Jesus were not ends in themselves but signs of a higher power and a greater meaning. Nicodemus didn't understand this.

This misunderstanding of Jesus is a theme that runs throughout the gospel of John. (See John 4:48, John 6:2, 14-15) The kind of faith that is "wowed" by miracles is inadequate.

Have you ever noticed how many people even today equate faith with miracles and truth with popularity? They may believe in Jesus. But, Jesus does not believe in them. They need something more, a whole new life that begins with whole new way of seeing Jesus.

WE DON'T KNOW JESUS

Quickly the conversation turns from what Nicodemus knows to what Nicodemus doesn't know. Jesus talks about birth and poor Nicodemus thinks about ordinary birth instead of a spiritual birth. Before long this sophisticated teacher of is mumbling to himself saying, "How can this be?"

Nicodemus' problem is apparent from the beginning when he comes to Jesus and says, "Now we know" Do we now? Do we know Jesus?

We know a lot in the modern world. We can explain the intricacies of the human genome. He can explain the inner workings of the atom. We know how to build a jet and predict the path of hurricanes. (Well, sometimes we can predict the path of hurricanes.)

But, the point is that we know things. And so it is only natural that we approach God in the same way. We think of God as one to be explained, investigated and explored. We know that God is all powerful and all knowing. We know so much about God right from the very start that it keeps us from knowing.

We come to God with so many assumptions that we have a hard time really listening to what God has to say.

And when we do finally hear God, it sounds so strange. What's this, God in three persons? How can this be? What's this, a power that comes from above that we cannot control or regulate? How can this be?

We in the modern world have problems with symbolism and mystery. We want a God that we can drag around on a leash. We want a God that we can know and control.

BORN FROM ABOVE

And yet Jesus tells us that this mysterious process called faith is not about us knowing. It is about being known. Faith is not a work. Faith is a gift.

Today's lesson uses a phrase that is popular in American Christianity, the phrase "born again." What does it mean to be "born again" or (as it can also be translated) "born from above?"

Does it simply mean that we give our assent to certain beliefs about Jesus and God? Is this what it means to be born again? Or does it mean something more radical, something like God's ways are not our ways?

When it comes to God, we're always starting over. The more we know, the more we understand how little we know. We can't control anything when it comes to God. We can no more control what God is going to do with us than we can control the wind.

That's what this passage teaches. Jesus said, "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." John 3:8 (NRSV)

Dr. Laura Mendenhall, the president of Columbia Seminary wrote that most of us think we know who God is. Most of us think that we know who God is calling us to be. Most of us think that we know what God wants us to do.

But, what if we were to stop telling God what we know?
What if we recognized that God is bigger than our naming of God?
What if we were willing to really listen for God's Word and let it sweep over us without direction from us?

What if we did not hold back but allowed the wind of God to take us to places not on our agenda? What would happen to us if we listened for God to call forth from us that which we did not recognize as being possible?

Have you ever come to church fairly confident that you were on the right path in your life only to find yourself surprised by something you heard in Scripture, challenged by something you heard in the sermon, or even disturbed by the words of a fellow worshipper?

Quite often that's how God rebirths us. That's how God gets through our hard headed, "know it all" state of mind.

That night as Nicodemus came to Jesus with certainty about what he knew. He left with questions about what he didn't know.

I think that we need to cultivate a love for the unknown. We need to know that we don't know.

GRACE VERSUS SELF-HELP RELIGION

William James in his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* states that the religious traditions of the world have two things in common. First, they all claim that there is something wrong with our lives as we typically live them. And second, they speak of a solution to that problem.

However, James notes, "... that solution is rarely within ourselves."

In contrast we Americans have always been big do-it-yourselfers ... even when it comes to religion. We believe in our heart of hearts that we can discover the secret to religious success.

The religious book market is filled with how to books. But, sometimes our solutions for spiritual problems can seem rather ridiculous.

Have you seen the movie, *Bull Durham*? In that flick Annie, baseball groupie and seeker extraordinaire recounts her journey in this way. She said,

"I now believe in the church of baseball. I tried all the major religions and most of the minor ones. I've worshipped Buddha, Allah, Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, trees, mushrooms, and Isadora Duncan.

I know things. For instance, there are 108 beads in a Catholic rosary and there are 108 stitches in a baseball. When I learned that, I gave Jesus a chance. But, it just didn't work out between us. The Lord laid too much guilt on me ..."

Annie's problem is the problem with many a seeker. Like Nicodemus she came with expectations. She knew what she wanted in a god, but her

expectations were too small. Finally she found a god that was small enough for her expectations, the god of baseball.

Even those of us who can talk for days about the theories of the atonement and the mysteries of the Trinity can have a god that is too small. The joy of mysterious faith is replaced with life draining doctrinal purity. Grace is replaced with works. Courageous witness is replaced with judgment.

As one commentator put it,

“The heart of Christian faith is not intellectual truth, or theology, or academic and abstract concepts, which can be discussed, understood, and therefore controlled like the law, with which Nicodemus was so familiar. At the heart of Christian faith is a mystery which must be experienced to be known. It is the mystery of redemption.”

Salvation and new birth still comes from above. It is above us and beyond us. We cannot achieve it. It can only be received as God’s good gift.

As Christians we don’t believe that it is possible to discover God. We believe that God discovers us.

As Paul put it,

“Salvation is not by works. Salvation is by grace through faith.”

Jesus put another way. Jesus said in effect, “Salvation is like a cool breeze on a hot summer night.”

THE COOL BREEZE OF GRACE

Some of us can remember what it was like to visit Grandma and Grandpa out in the country. They didn’t have any air conditioning, and so when the chores were done everyone would go out on the front porch and rock and talk and try to escape the heat.

And then without warning the leaves of the trees would rustle and the talk would stop. And everyone would remain quiet and sit back and savor the

breeze. The gift of a cool breeze after a long, hot day might have been the best gift any of us have ever received.

That's grace. That, says Jesus, is what the kingdom of God is all about. It's above us and beyond us, but it brings us what we really need.

Many of us think that we know so much. But, in reality we are full of hot air.

Maybe what we need is not another class or another meeting but an opportunity to sit on the front porch and wait for a cool breeze and be filled with wonder about the fact that we don't know where it came from or where it's going but it sure was good while it was with us.

And then on the front porch of God's house we will be in the proper frame of mind to really hear the good news that comes from above, the news that can change us forever.

Are you settled in your rocking chair? Can you feel the cool breeze blowing?

Then listen to the word that comes from above.

God is not out to get anyone. God is out to save everyone ... the whole world. That's why he sent his son into the world, to give everyone that most important message; God loves the world very much.

Even when the world treated God's Son shamefully by crucifying him on a cross the love of God was not deterred. He sent the Spirit into the world to keep the cool breezes blowing and the love of God flowing.

The Spirit of God is not something that we figure out or control. It is instead a manifestation of the grace of God, a breath of something fresh, something cool, a much needed change in the stale air that surrounds us.

And sometimes when I least expect it, God helps me lay down my projects and plans and I just enjoy the breeze, the mysterious wind that blew on the sixth day of creation, the Spirit of the loving God who sent his Son for our salvation.

God help us open ourselves to that Holy Wind, the Holy Spirit of the Father's love in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN