



“We Are Nicodemus”
Scripture – Mark 11:1-11
Sermon Preached by Randall T. Clayton
Sunday, May 31, 2015

He was a devout man, no doubt about that at all. He prayed daily, studied the scriptures constantly, visited the sick regularly, and offered words of comfort to the grieving relentlessly. He was one of the “regulars” in church. Each and every week you’d find him in his usual place, that pew that felt almost like it had been bequeathed to him by God. He was comfortable in his place and the comfort of the familiar seat in the sanctuary helped him focus on God. But he didn’t just sit in worship. No, he worshipped God with everything he had. When the congregation sang, he sang with gusto. When the congregation prayed, he prayed with fervor.

If he were living today, he probably would have checked-in on Facebook when he arrived, and tweeted whenever the preacher said something in the sermon that spoke to him, or whenever the music moved him. He would have done these things because he would have wanted to share with the world that which was so important to him: worshipping the God who created him, who sustained him, and who he knew would one day redeem him.

I suppose that he was the type of man you’d find fixing pancakes on Saturday mornings for those who were hungry, and distributing produce in Community Hall on Wednesdays to those in need. If he had been handy with a hammer, I’m pretty sure you’d see him joining the *Phix-It Corp* on Thursdays as well.

He was a good man, no doubt about that. His name could have been Simon or Max, but his name was Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was one of the leaders of the Pharisees. As a Pharisee, he believed that God’s law had to be strictly observed and that strict observance was necessary in order to obtain God’s blessing. And since he was a Pharisee, he would have believed that God’s law included not just the 10 Commandments, but a whole host of other rules, regulations and rituals which had grown up over time. He believed all of these needed to be strictly observed in order for God to be pleased.

Given the Pharisees’ concern about keeping God’s laws, and their strict interpretation of those laws, it is not particularly surprising that the Pharisees had what might best be described as a “tense relationship” with Jesus. Time and time again in the Gospels, we see the Pharisees confronting Jesus, sparring with Jesus, trying to trap Jesus, in opposition to Jesus. But it wasn’t that the Pharisees were necessarily bad people, or even that their motives were always bad. It’s just that they seemed to be perpetually in the dark where Jesus was concerned; and their attitude of certainty about what God required kept them in the dark about what God was really doing in the world.

While Jesus had many conversations with Pharisees in broad daylight, the first time Nicodemus steps onto the stage in John's Gospel, he comes to Jesus at night.

Some have said that he came to Jesus at night because one school of thought held that it was actually best to study God's law at night because there might be fewer distractions than in the daylight. If he really wanted to learn from Jesus then maybe he chose to arrive when the stars were out and the moon was shining so that there might be less to disturb his concentration.

But it's also highly possible that he chose to seek Jesus at night simply to avoid being seen by anyone else. Maybe he was intrigued by what he had heard about Jesus, and had a desire to talk with Jesus, to ask Jesus some questions, and to find out what additional rules he needed to keep. But knowing the tensions between Jesus and the religious establishment, he might not have wanted anyone to know he had sought Jesus out. Go at night when the possibility of being seen by neighbors and friends would be less than in the daylight.

Whatever the reason that Nicodemus chose to come to Jesus at night, I suspect John makes a point of telling us this information as a way of suggesting that Nicodemus came to Jesus knowing a lot about God's law but being in the dark about what God was doing in Jesus Christ.

When Nicodemus found Jesus that night he said to Jesus, "We know that you are from God...we've seen the signs you do..." By this point Nicodemus had probably heard how Jesus had turned water into wine at a wedding feast, which was a sign of God's abundance. By this night time meeting, he was also surely aware that Jesus had turned over tables of the money changers in the temple and thereby enacting a sign to the world that sacrifices weren't needed; God's abundant love didn't require that. And so by this point, he had heard enough to realize that Jesus wasn't just any old carpenter...not that this Jesus was the Son of God; not that this Jesus was the Savior of the world; but surely this Jesus was a learned man who had a connection with God nonetheless.

"Jesus," he said, "we know you are a teacher, for no one can do what you do apart from the presence of God." But then before Nicodemus had a chance to ask Jesus whatever it was he came to ask, Jesus jumped into the conversation saying, "Nicodemus...No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again."

Born again...That's what Nicodemus heard. No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.

But the problem is that Jesus didn't say you had to be born again. Not here. Not anywhere. The same phrase that means "born again" also means "born anew" or "born from above." Based on what Jesus says in the following sentences, I think that Jesus meant, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

But thinking Jesus said we had to be "born again", Nicodemus was perplexed. He knew that you can't be born a second time. He knew, just as we know, that you go from infancy through childhood and your teenage years before you reach adulthood; and, that you can't do it over again, no matter how much we might want to re-do a portion of our lives.

"Jesus, what do you mean? Born again? That's impossible." Yes, Nicodemus was certain about that.

But Jesus answered Nicodemus' question by saying essentially, "I'm not talking about entering the womb a second time, that's not what this is about...what I'm saying is that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. And this Spirit, Nicodemus, blows where it blows, moves as it will, and does it all by itself with any help from you. Just as you can't control the wind, you do not control God's activity in your life or in the world around you. By your actions, you can't be born anew, or born from above, but you can open yourself to being caught up in the winds of God's Spirit that blow through creation."

“How can these things be?” Nicodemus asked. How can it be?

And Jesus replied, “You are a teacher, a man who has thoroughly and completely studied in God’s word and yet, you do not understand this? How can that be?” And then Jesus reminds him of God’s love, of a love that reaches out into the world, of a love that sent the Son into the world, without any help from any of us. Jesus reminded Nicodemus – and us – of a love which draws us back to God, of a love that draws us closer to one another, of a love which not only sustains us but which redeems us as well.

Nick came to Jesus certain that God’s blessing was predicated on keeping a rigid set of laws, believing that he needed to do something in order to earn God’s care. But in that nocturnal meeting Jesus began to chip away at that certainty, to deconstruct and undo what Nicodemus believed. And this undoing of his certainty that blessings flow from rigid adherence to God’s law and that God’s love was predicated on our actions, this undoing was necessary for him to experience anew the miracle of being born from above, the miracle of a gift which has nothing to do with what we know or what we do.

Jesus was speaking to a man named Nicodemus, but I think he could have been speaking to us just as well, because I think that on some level we are Nicodemus.

We act as if we believe at times that we can secure our own future by our actions, and that our actions can indeed save us. Out of this belief, we build bigger armies and secure powerful weapons in an effort to guarantee our security. We dismantle safety nets for the poor in the name of controlling a budget which is supposed to help insure long term solvency. We give less than we could because we are afraid that we won’t have enough if we give too much. But as it was for Nicodemus, I think God challenges this world view, seeks to deconstruct it, to undo it in our lives.

Sometimes, like it was for Nicodemus, we come to Jesus and do not find the answers we think we will find, but find instead more questions. We encounter scripture and discover it doesn’t necessarily say what we think it says, or what the world has told us it says. And that can be unsettling for sure. But the undoing of what we think we know may indeed be part of the Spirit’s breath upon our hearts that allows us to become open to hearing God’s call anew and participating anew in God’s activity in our lives and in the world around us.

Like Nicodemus, despite our attempts to live faithfully, we do sometimes misunderstand what God is calling us to be and to do. For instance, we misunderstood the Gospel when we supported slavery many decades ago. And we misunderstood the Gospel when we barred women from ministry, and when we closed the door to the leadership gifts of persons in the LGBT community. And, we misunderstand when we act as if creation were ours to destroy and use, rather than till and keep and tend for future generations. We in the church misunderstand the Gospel when we resist the risky road, preferring the path that seems comfortable, familiar and safe instead. But Jesus didn’t run from Nicodemus when he did not understand, or when he misunderstood. Instead, Jesus was there for Nicodemus (as Jesus is there for us), patiently listening, patiently explaining, patiently prodding, and patiently undoing his certainty, so that he might become open to God’s work in his life and in the world around him.

Nicodemus first approached Jesus in the dark of night, trying to figure out what he needed to do to earn God’s love, to acquire God’s blessing, to insure his salvation. It is quite possible that when dawn broke the next morning, Nicodemus was more confused and had more questions than he had when the sun had set the night before and he started out to encounter Jesus. But that encounter wasn’t the end of the journey; it was merely one part of the journey which had just begun. As the night with Jesus turned to morning and that morning turned to a new morning, and the weeks passed one upon another, the wind of God’s Spirit continued to move him, prod him, care for him, over and over and over again. And over and over and over again, he experienced being born anew from above.

You see, I don't believe that his rebirth was a once-and-done kind of thing. It was a process that lasted for the rest of his life as he encountered Jesus, opened himself to new understandings, struggled with new questions, and got caught up in the work of the Spirit blowing through creation. And so it is with us: as the winds of the Spirit continue to move upon the face of the earth, and as we come to God, open to new understandings, struggling with new questions, we too are born anew in God's Spirit as our faith deepens.

While Nicodemus steps off the stage at this point in John's Gospel, he doesn't leave the theater. Indeed, we see him later on, and when we do, he is no longer standing in the dark, but in the light; he is no longer hiding, but defending Jesus – at least cautiously – to a group of Pharisees. His faith had grown. Still later in John's Gospel, we see Nicodemus yet again. This time he is even more bold; this time he demonstrates an ever deeper faith; this time he is caught up in the work of God's Spirit more completely. This time we see him throwing caution to the wind as he joins Joseph of Arimathea at the foot of the cross to lovingly prepare Jesus' crucified and nail scarred body for burial; and, along with Joseph, to carefully and tenderly place the body in its grave. Now he's no longer hiding in the dark, but is responding to God's love in Jesus Christ; now he's not cautiously defending, but he is risking his reputation, risking his well-being and even risking his life, to serve the one who had given his for us all.

His encounter with Jesus moved him from certitude to questioning, from hiding in the shadows to standing beside an open grave, from the safe and known path of keeping a long list of rules and regulations, to the very risky road of burying the one the empire had executed as a criminal while the religious establishment looked on that execution with approval. His name was Nicodemus. But really, it could have been Linda or Robert, Nate or Jackie, or any of our names. Indeed, as Jesus was there for Nicodemus, Jesus is there for us; and he invites us to come, to question, to let our certainties be undone where necessary, and to discover true life in God's love as we become caught up in the work of the Spirit moving through space and time.

We are Nicodemus, my friends. Thanks be to God for that!