

Weekend of Sunday, May 27, 2018
1st Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B
Primary Text: John 3:1-17
Sermon Title: “This and Not That”

Theme

Jesus’ miracles prompt Nicodemus to visit him in secrecy. Jesus tells him about being born of the Spirit and about the Son who has been sent by God to save.

Text

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus 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?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The 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.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus 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. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that 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.”

Sermon

My son Drake was named after my wife, Carol's favorite grandfather, George Drake, and I was fine with that name. Aaron was named while I was out of the room, and I had little to say about it to a woman who had just given birth.

I was not as biblically literate then as I am now, but if I had been I would have petitioned for three of my favorite heroes of the Bible.

- 1) David from the Old Testament who, though a sinner, was known as a man after God's own heart. I can think of no greater thing to be known for.
- 2) Peter from the New Testament who, though a bumbler during Jesus' earthly ministry, became the leader of the Apostolic church.
- 3) And my third favorite hero is Nicodemus, the supporting actor of this Gospel Reading. He only appears three times in all of scripture, but his bit-part in the drama of Jesus Christ, the Messiah of God is classic. He is an inspiration to me. More on that in a moment.

I suspect most of you are familiar with the story. It comes from just the third chapter of John's gospel and so not much has happened yet as far as the story of Jesus goes.

According to John, Jesus arrived on the scene, called some disciples, and went to a wedding. From there he went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and at least according to John's Gospel, he cleansed the Temple by pushing all those merchants and money-changers out. In other Gospel renderings, the cleansing of the Temple took place the week of his Passion. Either way, that got him noticed by the Jews and especially by the Jewish religious establishment, also known as the Sanhedrin.

Nicodemus entered the scene. Now John gave us a few important clues to what was going on in the dialogue that followed. First he noted that Nicodemus was "a Pharisee" and "a leader of the Jews." The Pharisees were a denomination of Judaism in the same way that Lutherans are a denomination of Christianity. Nicodemus was also member of the Sanhedrin, the equivalent of our Churchwide

Council, a group of people, lay and priests, who oversaw the operation and orthodoxy of the Jewish faith.

Second he noted that Nicodemus “came by night.” I believe that this is an indication that Nicodemus came on his own to check out Jesus for himself. He knew that the nature of the Sanhedrin was to condemn anyone who didn't tow the company line, rocked the boat, or upset the status quo, and upset the status quo Jesus had, when he cleansed the Temple.

But I also believe that Nicodemus was a faithful godly man who took God at his word when he promised Messiah would come. And I further believe that he wondered if Jesus might just be the one that all Israel was waiting for. The risk of being seen going to Jesus and his intentions being misunderstood would be minimized by going to him by night. But the notion that Messiah might have come in the person of Jesus and him missing out on that drove him to take the risk.

When he met Jesus face to face he began by saying, ²“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.”

You see, in this expression he 1) acknowledged Jesus as Rabbi, a term of respect as a teacher of the people, and 2) Nicodemus acknowledged that Jesus, was from God, because he, Nicodemus, knew no one could do the things he did apart from God.

That beginning to the conversation is an indication to me that Nicodemus was at least open to believe in Jesus as Messiah. And that openness will make all the difference.

But then the conversation began to get awkward.

³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

By that Jesus was simply acknowledging that to “get him and his ministry” one will need to have more than intellectual knowledge. One will have to be a spiritual person, or as Jesus put it, be “born from above.”

And it is from here that things got testy.

At this point I would like to digress for a moment and share an experience I had that illuminates this dialogue.

Last January Dr. YT Chiu invited Sister Pat Fesler and I be guest speakers on the spiritual elements of care at a Continuing Ed event at Northside Hospital for interns. Now YT always corrects me when I call him Dr. Chiu but in this situation, I am referring to him in his professional vocation.

As I understood Dr. Chiu, his thesis was that medical students are trained to use all the medical science at their disposal to preserve and sustain life. But in that training, young doctors can lose sight of the reality that human beings are mortal, and therefore terminal, and that at some point we will die and there is nothing anyone can do about it. And young doctors need to understand that so that when that point comes, they know 1) that pending death is not their fault or a failure on their part, and 2) the next phase of the patient's care might logically be hospice and pastoral care.

Well, I tell you that because Dr. Chiu also had a local Rabbi on the panel, Rabbi Franklin Muller of Congregation Rodef Sholom in Wick Park. I spoke first, then Sr. Pat spoke, and then Rabbi Muller took the stage and pointing to me he said, "I take issue with my Christian brother. We Jews don't believe in any after-life. We believe in what we can see, and understand scientifically. We believe that we are created by God and called to lead a good law-abiding lives and at the end of it, that's it! We just die."

I was shocked! I have to admit I don't know many Jews, and those I have known are not religious, meaning they know little about what they believe if they believe at all, and now I know why. It is a terrible belief system! You're born and you die and that's it! Is there any wonder why there is no such thing as a Jewish evangelist?

Now, I know there are denominations of Judaism today just as there were back in Jesus' day. And I don't know which denomination of Judaism Rabbi Muller serves. I also don't think they all share Rabbi Muller's hopeless belief. But that

experience informs my understanding of this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Jesus was speaking about concepts that were simply not a part of the Nicodemus' Jewish belief system and so naturally he had a difficult time understanding. But notice he didn't argue with Jesus, he simply asked, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus, Rabbi, how can these things be?

Far be it for me to criticize Jesus' reaction to Nicodemus' confusion, but today, 2000 years later, I wouldn't have answered Nicodemus, a 1st Century seeker, like Jesus did. A more effective response might be, "I know you don't understand. You have been a part of a religious system that has a misguided understanding of my Father in Heaven. Allow me to explain the true loving, graceful, and merciful nature of my Father and your Father, and if the Spirit of understanding is with you and you accept it, it will change your life now, and in the age to come."

And then he said those famous words we love to hear, (say them with me)

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."

Is it any wonder that Martin Luther called John 3:16 "the heart of the Bible and the Gospel in miniature?"

I want to tell you about the other two references to Nicodemus in scripture, because they tell us something about what happened to Nicodemus as a result of that late night conversation with Jesus.

^{7:50}Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" ⁵²They replied, "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee."

In John 7, Jesus was once again in Jerusalem stirring things up to the point that the Sanhedrin wanted to arrest him, and in their debate about what to do with him, Nicodemus said, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" It's a simple logical and procedural question right? But look at the Sanhedrin's response. They replied, "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee."

Good strategy right? Attack anyone who disagrees with your predetermined verdict.

Well, the Sanhedrin already didn't like Jesus or his messing with their religion and soon after this they determined he had die; that was the only way to be done with him once and for all.

Now, the reason I bring up this passage is that I think this passage demonstrates that Nicodemus, having met and dialogued with Jesus face to face, became a believer. But still stuck in that awkward time during Jesus' ministry, and not after the Resurrection, he was unable to make the full-devotion transition to disciple and follower, at least not yet.

But the last time we hear of Nicodemus comes in Chapter 19. Jesus had been crucified and died on the cross. All of his disciples and followers abandoned him and scattered into the crowd to save their own skins. But this was when Nicodemus surfaced again.

³⁸After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴²And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

If you are my age or older then you will remember the old fashioned dime store. Funny that we now call the same kind of store a dollar store. In small town America, dime stores were important because they had a little of everything – you know, “this and that.” That expression, “this and that” usually refers to a random collection of things not necessarily related – like the inventory of a dime store or dollar store. I borrowed and then edited that expression for my sermon title, because in this reading from the Gospel of John I hear Jesus using that kind of thinking to explain the spiritual life to Nicodemus.

“Nicodemus, in order to see and live into the kingdom of God now and in the age to come, one must be re-born, born from above. *This* is the new birth I am speaking of, but *not that* human birth you are thinking of done over. The rebirth I am speaking of is a gift of the Spirit and is open to all who are sincere in wanting to know the truth I reveal and believing in it.”

Now personally, I was born into a Christian family and so I have never known any other way than the Christian way. But I can imagine how the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ may be a difficult concept to understand. It was difficult for Nicodemus. Imagine how difficult a concept it is to our contemporaries who are not born into it.

Jesus came and called all people to a new and right understanding of the true loving, graceful, and merciful nature of his Father and our Father, and if the Spirit of understanding is with us as we prayed last weekend, then we too ought to be changed by it. And if we are changed by it we too ought to be in-spired to act like we believe.

In this way, things are no different today than they were in Jesus' day. I am acutely aware that among those driving by churches today are carloads of people, parents and their children, generations of people who have no idea what we do inside these walls, let alone outside these walls.

Yes, Nicodemus in one of my heroes of Scripture. He faithfully sought the fulfillment of the promises of God and was open to God doing a new thing in Jesus from Galilee. And for him and for me and maybe even for you, that has made all the difference.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

My Raisin' the Bar Challenge for you this week is this. Be open to be used by the spirit to share your belief with another, for their benefit and for the benefit of the Kingdom of God.

Prayer

Heavenly Father we thank you every day for your Son and our Lord Jesus. And we also give you thanks for great heroes of scripture whose faith inspires us still today. Guide us to all truth by your Spirit, that we may proclaim all that Christ has revealed and rejoice in the glory he shares with us. Glory and praise to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen