

"Blessed are the Curious"
John 3:1-17
March 5, 2023 Lent 2
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Nicodemus was either a man of great courage and curiosity or he was a curious coward. Perhaps, like most of us, he was a bit of both.

Before we meet Nicodemus, let's talk a bit about the *Gospel of John*. When we look at the four *Gospels*- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John- we can see immediately that John is not like the rest. My New Testament professor in seminary called John "the strange Gospel." John begins with a prologue which sets up his theological theme. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God."*

In chapter one we meet John the Baptist who declares Jesus to be the "Lamb of God". Jesus calls his first disciples and attends a wedding with his mother where he turns water into wine.

In John's gospel miraculous acts are not called "miracles." They are called "signs" because they are symbols that point the way to God. In John's Gospel we find that Jesus speaks very differently than the way he is recorded in the other three Gospels. John doesn't include any of Jesus's ironic, mind-twisting, and sometimes humorous parables; there is less dialogue between Jesus and others. He speaks mostly in long monologues and speeches, and he often gives confusing answers.

One commentator suggests that John's greatest literary and theological technique is "misunderstanding." It goes like this: someone asks Jesus a question. He gives them an answer and they say, "I don't get it." He then replies with an explanation that is even more difficult to follow. Then he gives a speech and an explanation that no one understands. What a strange gospel.

In his book, *THE FOURTH GOSPEL*, the late John Shelby Spong suggested that John's Gospel is about life- expanded life, abundant life, and ultimately eternal life. He calls us to experience this Gospel as a *"doorway into a new dimension of life."* He wrote, *"It is a journey into the heart of life, a journey beyond the boundaries of life and ultimately a journey into both a new consciousness and a whole new understanding of what Christianity is."* (1)

The purpose of John's Gospel is transformation. Near the end of the gospel, in chapter twenty, verse 31, John wrote, "*These words are written so that you may come to believe.*" This Gospel doesn't just give us more information about Jesus.

It encourages us to encounter Jesus and in doing so, we will be changed. Our Lenten journey invites us to experience Jesus as the witnesses in this Gospel experienced him; to bring him our questions and our misunderstandings; and to ultimately find ourselves transformed by his presence in our lives.

It is important to remember that John wrote to a community of Jewish Christians who have been ostracized for their belief in Jesus. Most of them had been kicked out of their local synagogues and were considered outsiders by their own people. They were afraid and uncertain about the future.

One of the prominent themes of the fourth Gospel is the difference between light and darkness. For John, light equals belief, relationship with Jesus, and darkness equals unbelief, lack of or refusal to be in relationship with him. It is quite fitting then that our first story of an encounter with Jesus happens late at night- when it is dark. The tension is set up quickly as we learn that the visitor is a Pharisee, and it is the middle of the night.

Since entering the holy city of Jerusalem, Jesus had been making quite a name for himself. He raised a ruckus in the temple by chasing out the merchants who were cheating the worshipers- all in the name of religion. It was the first of his many accusations against the temple culture and the leaders who had allowed greed and corruption to make a home in God's house. You can be sure the religious leaders- including the Pharisees- were already holding meetings about this man Jesus and trying to figure out how they could stop him. That's what makes this nighttime visitor even more interesting- and dangerous.

Nicodemus is called a "leader of the Jews." He was part of the religious elite, a wealthy man, not only a Pharisee but also a member of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court. His credentials were impeccable. His reputation was stellar. He was a good man. He knew the Jewish law frontward and backward and sideways. He was the expert everyone else turned to with their questions. But apparently, something was missing for Nicodemus, and he went to Jesus to find it.

John makes sure that we know the Pharisee came to see Jesus under the cover of darkness. Maybe he was sneaking around in the night so the other Pharisees wouldn't see him meeting Jesus.

Maybe he was a spy, coming to question Jesus so he could report back to the council. Or maybe, as a religious man himself, he knew the best time to study the law was in the peace and quiet of the night when all distractions of the day were tucked into bed. Jesus was

drawing large crowds so maybe Nicodemus thought the best time to have a serious conversation with him was in the middle of the night when he was alone. Whatever the reason, John wants us to know that it is nighttime.

Nicodemus meets Jesus and calls him "Rabbi" to show respect and then he begins with a compliment. *"We know that you are a teacher who has come from God because no one would ever be able to do the kinds of things you are doing apart from God."* He didn't ask a question, but Jesus launches into a sermon about being born from above with wind and water and Spirit. And there sits poor Nicodemus thinking, "I just came by to say hello."

Jesus knew that his visitor was searching for more than just a quick introduction. Jesus recognized a spiritual hunger in this man, a deep yearning for God. This late-night meeting shows that not even religious leaders have all the answers. In fact, sometimes we don't even know the questions.

Jesus offered him an invitation that he had no idea how to accept. It was almost as though they weren't even speaking the same language. The Pharisee knows so much about religion that he can't find room for a relationship- a relationship with Jesus. He is a curious but cautious person- one who is drawn to the amazing things Jesus is doing but unwilling to take the next step to change his life. He has a good life. He is comfortable with a faith that comes from weighing all the religious evidence and then drawing logical, sane conclusions. He has memorized the law of God and he thinks that is enough. He, and others, assume that he has reached the pinnacle of religious intelligence, but Jesus throws him for a loop when he says, *"You are just a baby in the faith."*

Jesus does not criticize his faith. He just tells him that it is incomplete. He invites Nicodemus to put away his law books and enter into a relationship with God; to be open to the winds of the Spirit that cannot be controlled or legislated. Jesus brought a new way to relate to God; a new way to experience God's abundance and grace. It was through a personal, loving, intimate relationship. Jesus loses Nicodemus when he says, "You must be born from above." That phrase is too often translated only as "born again." But the Greek word can be translated, "again, anew, from above."

Nicodemus takes those words literally and asks Jesus how an old man can be born a second time. But Jesus was not speaking literally, he was speaking spiritually. He was inviting this religious man to think with his heart and not just with his head.

Nicodemus has spent his life learning the laws of God, but he has yet to really know God. And when God in the flesh, in the person of Jesus, offers him an invitation he doesn't know what to do with it. Rebirth, renewal, new life all require the end to one way of life and the start of another. It is risky. It is scary. It isn't easy. And it doesn't happen just

once in a lifetime but over and over again- for us as individuals and as a faith community. The instigator of this new life is the Spirit of God. Called by one theologian (Kalbryn McLean), the "Wild Child of the Holy Trinity", the Spirit is like the wind- we cannot control it, or contain it, only welcome it, trust it is from God, and be open to its transforming power.

On that dark night, Nicodemus was confronted with the bright light of the gracious, unexpected presence of God in the person of Jesus. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, *"As far as I can tell, the only thing Nicodemus did wrong on that night he met Jesus was to leave the room. If he had only been able to stay put with the sting of his ignorance a little longer- the fear of losing his grip, the anxiety of his unanswerable questions- if only he had been able to forgive himself, then a whole new way of life might have opened up for him."* (2)

This is not the last we hear of Nicodemus in John's Gospel. He appears twice more- so perhaps his curiosity did lead him in the right direction. Maybe the light finally dawned for him. We find him next in chapter seven, defending Jesus's right to a hearing based on Jewish law when the Pharisees wanted to arrest him (7:50-51). And there he is again at the end of the Gospel, in chapter 19, after the horror of the crucifixion, assisting Joseph of Arimathea (another secret follower) in preparing the body of Jesus for burial (19:39-40).

Curiosity is a good thing in the life of faith. It encourages us to ask questions, to question what we think we know, and to seek out new ways of living into our relationship with Jesus.

I am concerned for those who think their faith is carved in stone and will remain the same for all eternity. Any fluctuation at all in their beliefs, any questions about their faith can send their whole belief system crashing to the ground. Faith is a relationship with Jesus and like all relationships we learn and grow into it over time. And that is a good thing. We will have ups and downs along the way. Some days our faith will feel strong and resilient and other days we will wonder if we have any faith at all.

Curiosity is an important element of faith. It is important that we not lose our sense of wonder or our willingness to ask tough questions without easy answers. Jesus isn't going to walk away from us if we ask hard questions, in fact, those questions may just bring us closer to him.

God blesses the curious because they are ready to learn and experience something new. Nicodemus followed his curiosity about Jesus far enough to get him into the same room with Jesus, but not far enough to truly experience the transformational new life Jesus offered. I hope, for Nicodemus's sake, that came later.

The Pharisee believed that Jesus came from *God*- that is a big step- but that is where he stopped. There is room for religion in the world, plenty of it; Nicodemus represents it. What is lacking is the Divine Spirit. The term "Spirit" denotes an entirely different world. It is a world vulnerable to the untamed wind of *God*. Nicodemus tries to stuff Jesus into his own small, limited understanding of religion and so he cannot grasp the strange, audacious ways of *God* who persists in making all things new.

Perhaps the metaphor to "be born again" isn't such a bad one because a life of faith is built on baby steps. It takes us back to beginning and invites us to open our imagination and reconsider our relationship with *God*. Jesus invited Nicodemus, as he invites us, to come into the light of day and become mature believers, full participants in the abundant life he offers.

The relationship Jesus offers is big enough for all of us and for our ignorance, our unbelief, our fear, and our skepticism. It is wide enough to welcome our curiosity and our questions. Accepting this invitation to a deeper relationship with Jesus requires a break from life as we know it; it requires an end to our limited belief system; it requires a risky journey to new life for us as individuals and as a congregation. I am curious to see what that will look like for us.

As we journey through this season of Lent remember that we worship a *God* who persists in making all things new- even Nicodemus, even us.

Blessed are the curious, for they will know *God*.

Amen.

End Notes:

- THE FOURTH GOSPEL: TALES OF A JEWISH MYSTIC, John Shelby Spong. Harper One. 2013. P. 19.

- HOLY ENVY: FINDING GOD IN THE FAITH OF OTHERS, Barbara Brown Taylor.
Harper One. 2019. P. 173.