

Nicodemus

*2nd in Lenten Series:
Heart to Heart Talks with Jesus*

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

March 8, 2020

Psalm 121

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? ²My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. ³He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. ⁴He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. ⁵The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. ⁶The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. ⁷The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. ⁸The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

John 3:1-17

Now 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.

I admit that the older I have grown, the more comfortable I have become in the presence of Nicodemus. What I mean by that is I feel freer to recognize in Nicodemus something of myself when I am bold to be honest about my own deepest questions of faith. He goes to Jesus at night – afraid to be seen in the light of day. Nicodemus lays his soul bare. He has a little faith; he is attracted to what Jesus is saying and doing; but he also admits he does not fully understand Jesus. He is willing to ask questions about who Jesus is, and in so doing, he is honest about his reservations.

In this heart to heart conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, I find room for my own middle of the night kinds of questions, and my doubts about exactly what it is I believe. In our Presbyterian tradition, theological training for ministry equips us to translate ancient languages; to read the bible through the lens of historical criticism, or literary criticism, or a hermeneutic of suspicion; to explain the theological difference between this or that doctrine.

Recently I was leading the newly elected Elders, Deacons and Trustees through Officer Training by going over the Constitutional questions they will be asked on the day of their installation. We got to the one which asks: *Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do...* After I finished talking through the nuanced theological underpinnings of that question one of the group said, “Agnes, do you realize that you just covered two thousand years of Christian history in ten minutes?” My pastoral colleagues and I are trained and experienced to do just that! But the longer I’m in this work, I also realize that I have grown much more comfortable with that which I do not know. I am more willing, I think, to trust in a God I do not understand.

I can hang the hat of my faith on a hand full of scripture verses:

*My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth...
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear
no evil... and you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying
in a manger... nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ
Jesus our Lord...*

While the canon of my core beliefs has probably gotten smaller, I also realize that some of my doubts about God and God's ways with the world have grown, and I'm ok with that – because of the way Jesus makes room for folks like Nicodemus.

As is typical in John's gospel – this little midnight meeting is replete with many layers of meaning. Nicodemus is a learned man with impressive credentials. The gospel writer describes him as a Pharisee, a "leader of the Jews," and Jesus himself refers to him as a "teacher of Israel." By the way Nicodemus asks his questions, and by the way Jesus responds to him, we see he represents the religious intellectuals of his time.

As a religious leader, Nicodemus thinks he understands who God is and how God is revealed. He begins this conversation saying, "Rabbi, we know..." How would a religious leader know? By observation, by logic, by deduction?

In the previous chapter, Jesus has just saved a wedding party by turning gallons of water into wine. It was a convincing sign that God is with him. Nicodemus is aware of the word getting around about Jesus, about his miracles, about the crowd swelling wherever he goes. "We know... you are from God," he says to Jesus, all the while he is seeking further clarity, further certainty, more proof.

But Jesus wants Nicodemus to know that in him there is more going on than God offering visible, tangible proof by signs and miracles.

God is ushering in a new creation, and Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to let God change his whole way of being in the world. When Jesus says, “No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above,” and that circular talk begins about being born again, this is all that Jesus means: The Judaism that Nicodemus and Jesus both knew had a good deal to do with *being born into the right family*. What mattered was being a child of Abraham. Other things counted, such as observance of the law, but one’s primary identity was being a Jew descended from Abraham and Sarah. ¹

Jesus broadens God’s scope saying to Nicodemus: God is starting a new family in which this ordinary birth to the family tree of Abraham is not all there is. Now a birth by baptism – by water and the Spirit – is open to Jew and Gentile alike. When God became human, in the person of Jesus – all humanity – the world – is chosen and loved. Jesus wants Nicodemus to reorient his faith around that!

I like Nicodemus. If I am honest about what I believe, and how big my doubts are, and what I do not fully understand, and how hard it is to reorient my life around Jesus, I think his very presence in the gospel welcomes every single one of us into a heart to heart conversation with God. Biblical scholar, Fred Craddock, said the point of the Nicodemus story is this: Many shades of faith, many depths of faith, and many qualities of faith are found in those who surround Jesus.” ²

Nicodemus also reminds me of someone I knew and loved many years ago – a faithful member of the first church I served in downtown Atlanta. I think about this man a lot these days, so let me tell you about him and you’ll understand why. Charlie was a long time member of Central Presbyterian Church. He was a lawyer by profession and a theologian by avocation. Charlie came to church every Sunday for the

¹ Judith Jones, workingpreaching.org.

² Fred Craddock, *John*, Knox Preaching Guides, p. 30.

Adult Christian Education classes but he rarely attended worship. He was a man of deep conviction, but he also had his doubts – and he probed those doubts with a keen intellect and a Nicodemus-kind of questioning.

While he was still working in the legal profession, he earned a Master's degree in Theology from Columbia Seminary, and at the time of his death to cancer he was close to finishing his PhD in Middle Eastern languages at Emory. I asked him one time why he didn't go to worship and he said, "You preachers say things from the pulpit, and we sing hymns about things that are really beyond the scope of what we know." He had no use for platitudes. But he was there every week – even when his cancer treatments robbed him of his hair and his energy. He was always attending, and sometimes teaching, adult church school classes.

While his family was in worship, he waited on a bench just inside the front entrance to the Education building, where more often than not, he spent the hour talking to Alex. Alex was schizophrenic and nearly always on the edge of homelessness. He was a part of our downtown church community and benefited from the services of our winter night shelter, as well as the church's medical clinic. Sunday after Sunday, Alex would rock back and forth and talk to Charlie, and Alex had no idea that the kind man in front of him was the Chief Justice of Georgia's Supreme Court.

Charles Longstreet Weltner began his legal career working to implement the United States Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. the Board of Education* to outlaw racial segregation in public schools. In 1962 he was elected to represent Georgia's 5th Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives where he served two terms. When the state Democratic Party demanded they sign a loyalty oath that required him to support a full Democratic ticket, he had no idea that a renowned segregationist like Lester Maddox would rise to the top of the ticket for Governor. So after two terms Charlie Weltner refused to run for re-

election saying in his speech, “As all Democratic candidates, I signed a pledge to support on November 8th the nominees of the Democratic primary. And though I have always opposed Mr. Maddox in the past, I cannot violate my oath. Today, the one man in our state who exists as the very symbol of violence and oppression is the Democratic nominee for the highest office in Georgia. His entire public career is directly contrary to my deepest convictions and beliefs. And while I cannot violate my oath, neither can I violate my principles. I cannot compromise with hate. I love the Congress, but I will give up my office before I give up my principles.” Charlie Weltner was also the only Congressperson from the deep South to vote for the Voting Rights Act.

Charlie came home to Georgia, practiced law, was elected to the Superior Court in the Atlanta Circuit, and later to the Supreme Court of Georgia, while he studied theology, mastered seven ancient languages, taught Sunday school, and refused to come to worship because of his doubts, which I would say were part and parcel of his kind of courageous faith.

His daughter, Susan, also a church friend of mine, told me about a conversation she had with him, which she later said I could share. About two weeks before he died, she asked him, “Daddy, what do you believe will happen after you die... do you think about what heaven will be like?” And out of all his brilliance, and the depth of his theological insight he answered, “Susan, I’m just a John 3:16 person myself.”³

God so loved the world, that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

People like Nicodemus who went to Jesus at night, people like Charlie Weltner who refused to claim more faith than he knew, but who

³ Charles Longstreet Weltner story remembered from my time at Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, details verified by his obituary in the New York Times, 9/2//92 and JFKlibrary.org, where he was the second recipient of the Profiles in Courage Award, 1991.

lived that faith with bold and sacrificial courage, people like us – who are both faithful and doubtful, are all invited into heart to heart talks with God through what we do know about Jesus.

We will meet up with Nicodemus again.

In chapter seven, when the police are sent out to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus cautions his fellow Pharisees to slow down saying, “Our law does not judge people without first giving him a fair hearing, does it?” And then in chapter nineteen, after the crucifixion when Joseph of Arimathea removed the body of Jesus from the cross, Nicodemus, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.

Together they wrapped the body of Jesus with spices and linens and laid him in the tomb. If his daughter were to ask him later what he really believed, I kind of wonder if Nicodemus might have simply said, “I’m just a John 3:16 person myself... God loves the world.... God sent Jesus to live and die and be raised for the world.

In this life, we have access to new life in his name, and eternal life to come.

AMEN.