

“Nic at Night”

John 3:1-15

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This morning it is Nicodemus' turn to take center stage. He was a prominent leader in Jerusalem that visited Jesus one evening.

I'm not surprised he did this because he was accustomed to discussing religion as a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. I doubt, however, that he ever had a conversation like this one. What transpired was a dialogue filled with fresh ideas about what it means to be a person of faith. Let me share with you what this story teaches me about our faith and its formation.

This passage teaches me that faith begins with questions. The dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus was filled with them.

In reply to Jesus' assertion that one must be born again to see the Kingdom of God, Nicodemus asked, "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

When Jesus told Nicodemus that no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit, Nicodemus asked, "How can this be?"

Even Jesus was puzzled because of Nicodemus' lack of understanding and asked, "You are Israel's teacher and do not understand these things?"

There is no shortage of questions in this narrative, which I see as beneficial to faith development. Questions can lead to deeper levels of understanding.

Do you ask a lot of questions, especially concerning religious matters? If you do, you are in good company, and I think on the right track.

My friend and teacher, Dr. Colin Harris writes, "Faithfulness has more to do with the questions we ask than answers we memorize." I like this kind of teacher.

The best teachers I had were the ones that were not afraid of questions. They valued curiosity, their own and mine. I always appreciated professors that began the semester by saying, "In this class, there are no dumb or silly questions." I believe this is the sign of a good teacher, especially when leading a discussion on spiritual matters.

For you see, faith involves more than we know. Life is bigger than we are and so is God. Our quest to understand both should make us insatiably curious.

I know we look to our faith for answers and quite often find them. This is comforting and reassuring. However, the Christian faith also has a leavening influence and is meant to disturb and disrupt. An authentic faith will lead to questions that result in a greater understanding of God, life and self. Ask Nicodemus.

These questions should also lead us to mentors that can help us sort through them as we develop our faith. Wasn't this the role that Jesus played in Nicodemus' life?

Why do you think Nicodemus went to see Jesus at night? Was he afraid for others to see him with Jesus? Perhaps. Could it have been, however, to spend some uninterrupted quality time with Jesus? I think so.

Do you think this was the last conversation Nicodemus had with Jesus? I don't think so. As a matter of fact, I would be willing to say they had many conversations after this one which led Nicodemus to help Joseph of Arimathea bury the body of Jesus after the crucifixion. I believe Nicodemus and Jesus became dear friends.

Who is your spiritual mentor? Who do you consult with when you have questions or struggle with your faith? Who has helped you develop a deeper understanding of your faith? Are you passing along to others what you have learned? Do you need to be a mentor for someone else? I cannot think of a better investment of your time.

What did Jesus teach Nicodemus that evening? I'm sure there were many things, but the one I wish to highlight this morning is this: **physical birth does not determine how close you can get to God.**

I am indebted to Dr. Alan Culpepper for planting this seed when he spoke in Prayer Meeting during one of our Advent Bible Studies. He made a passing reference to Nicodemus and introduced this idea to us. I've mulled it over for several months and find it intriguing and encouraging.

In that culture, birth decided how close you could get to God. The temple was even designed to keep people away from God, or at least at a proper distance. If you were a Jew, you could get closer to the Holy of Holies than a Gentile. If you were a male you could get closer than a female. If you were a Pharisee or priest, you could get closer than someone that was not. Nicodemus bought into this hierarchical mindset and probably never questioned it, until Jesus came along.

Jesus cut down their system and in essence said, "You don't have to stay in your place. You can be born again and remove all those barriers."

This idea was radical and revolutionary. It threatened everyone that benefited from this position of power and control. No wonder Nicodemus was confused and asked questions. His mind was being stretched beyond his wildest imagination. To think that a commoner, a gentile or a woman could be as close to God as a Torah-observing Pharisee or a member of the Sanhedrin was inconceivable. It was true, nevertheless, and Nicodemus was the first of his peers to wrestle with the magnitude and results of God's immeasurable grace.

Is this a lesson that you need to learn, too? Does it encourage and inspire you to know that you can be as close to God as you want to be? No one can hold you back unless you let them.

Perhaps you have lived under the impression that others are more worthy of God's mercy. You have needed a close relationship with God but felt He was not accessible or this level of faith was for others. The words of Jesus to Nicodemus should dispel that myth. You can be born again, or from above, and enter into a new and fulfilling relationship with Him.

Furthermore, as you grow closer to Him and seek His will, each revelation will lead to new understandings and the birth of new ideas that will result in changes in your attitude, relationships, values, priorities, beliefs, world view and behavior. It will be like being born again and again and again.

How many "aha" moments have I had in my lifetime? There are too many to count, but I have frequently said to myself, "Ah, now I understand what has been hidden so long."

Is this the kind of relationship you desire with God? Are you longing for a deep and strong faith? You can have it by opening your heart and asking the Lord to accompany you on your journey. Humbly let Him know you need Him and want a vital and living faith. Seek His heart and will through prayer, Bible study and worship. I know He will respond with grace and mercy. Just ask Nicodemus.