

“WERE YOU THERE? II – NICODEMUS”

Karen F. Bunnell
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John 3:1-17

He used to think he had all the answers. Had you given Nicodemus a test on faith and the law and the things of God, he would have passed with flying colors. He was a Pharisee, after all, a learned scholar. He had dedicated his life to learning! He knew it all, or at least he thought he did – yet something inside him compelled him to know more – so he went to see Jesus one dark night – and like that little boy in the children’s story, asked some pretty important questions.

You know what? Sadly, we don’t do that so much anymore – ask questions. Why? Because we think we have all the answers, and if we don’t, if we have a question, we quickly get it answered, by googling it! Even for things of faith. Want to know the names of Jesus’ disciples? You don’t have to spend time scrolling through pages of scripture – google it! You’ll have their twelve names in an instant.

Want to know what Jesus said about money and possessions (which, by the way, he did a lot!), google it, and you’ll get an instantaneous list of the passages.

Well, you get the idea. And of course, it’s not just things of faith, but everything, anything. Anything we want to know about, our questions can be answered in mere seconds, via computer.

What has the ability to do that done to us? Well, it has given us the feeling we don’t need to do any real searching for life’s answers. It has taken away the fruitfulness of searching itself – and the joy of making our own discoveries. And sadly, it has taken away the mystery of life and faith.

Everything seems so certain, and everyone seems so certain. So much so that, these days, there is a ton of strife in our society. Because I know the facts and I’m right – and your facts aren’t the same as my facts, so you’re wrong. And never the twain shall meet.

Well, thank goodness, that good old Nicodemus didn’t let his “book learning” get in the way of his desire to know more. Thank goodness, he trusted his gut, that gut feeling that there was more to know than he knew from his books. Thank goodness.

It wasn't, as you heard, by any means, an easy conversation. Parts of it were downright confusing to Nicodemus, mostly, I think, because his logical mind wouldn't let go and let the mystery in. But Jesus persists, and as one writer put it, he "picks up on words and concepts introduced by Nicodemus and turns the conversation toward deeper truths again and again. With each repetition Jesus shifts the conversation from the smallness of Nicodemus' view to the largeness of life in God, from the signs on which Nicodemus and others base their hope to the invisible mystery of the Spirit, which can give him birth into the truth that he is missing. (On-line, Commentary on John 3:1-17, Meda Stamper, workingpreacher.org)

You see, there was so much more to life and faith and God than Nicodemus was experiencing, and Jesus ached for him to know it. He needed to move him past his vast head knowledge to heart knowledge – to embracing the new life, the full life, the abundant life, that Christ offers. He needed to convince Nicodemus to give up that control he so tightly clung to and let God be God in his life.

Oh, dear friends, how easily we can become a Nicodemus. How easy it is for us to know about Jesus in our head – the facts, the stories, the scripture passages. How easy it is for us to have him all figured out – to "put God in a box" – as it's been called. It's safe that way. It's comfortable that way. But that's not the life we're invited to live as his disciples.

I read this week about a bishop named John Taylor Smith, who once was preaching in a cathedral, and on either side of him sat many dignitaries from the community. On his immediate right was the local archdeacon.

Well, Bishop Smith was preaching on this passage, "You must be born again," and he said these words: "My dear people, do not substitute anything for the new birth. You may be a member of a church, but church membership is not new birth, and except 'a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" Then he turned and pointed to the archdeacon and continued, "You may even be an archdeacon like my friend here and not be born again, and except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. You might even be a bishop like myself, and not be born again, and except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Well, the next day the bishop received a letter from that archdeacon which read: "My dear Bishop, you have found me out. I have been a clergyman for over thirty years, but I have never known anything of the joy that Christians speak of. Mine has been a hard, legal service. I did not know what was the matter with me, but when you pointed directly at me and said, 'You might even be an archdeacon and not be born again,' I realized in a moment what the trouble was. I had never known anything of the new birth."

The story went on to say that the Bishop contacted the archdeacon and they met together and prayed together, and the archdeacon responded to Christ's call like he never had before. He finally admitted his need of a Savior, and acknowledged Jesus as the Lord of his life. (Ibid)

For all I know, someone here this morning might be feeling the same way. You might be hearing Nicodemus' story and think "that's me." I know about Jesus, but I don't really know Jesus. I've learned the stories and the scriptures, but I haven't really let him into my heart.

If that's you, might I remind you that what Jesus is inviting Nicodemus and you and me into is not a hardship, but life and joy and fullness and abundance. Head knowledge is important, but heart knowledge is life-giving. Jesus wanted Nicodemus to know the fullness of life in God, and he wants us to know that as well. But it's our choice. Do we want to keep God in a box, where we think we have him all figured out, or do we want to let God's Spirit blow where it will, and take us to new and exciting places? To life like we've never known it before.

You know, I think that little children's book told us a lot. Little Nikolai had questions, but it was the Spirit leading the way that led him to discover the answers.

Are you willing to let God's Spirit lead the way in your life? Are you willing to give up control to him and go where he leads? Are you willing to risk the unknown? That's what Jesus is calling us to do, that's what faith in God is all about.

You know, I can't help but think of Terri Lokey right now. Terri, right this moment is in Costa Rica on a mission trip. She retired from teaching last year and I think, she's letting the Spirit of God lead her in wonderful ways. When she could be staying home and relaxing or being totally centered upon herself, instead she's left her home and family for several weeks to care for people in need in Costa Rica. You may have seen her posts if you're friends with her on Facebook, stacking cement blocks putting together the foundation of a building, working with women in a village, and coloring with little children. She sent me an email as well, and I can tell you, she is filled with joy doing what she's doing there. Terri is experiencing the abundant life Jesus talks about because she's let the Spirit lead her there.

Are you willing to let God's Spirit lead you? Are you willing to give up control and open your heart to Jesus? Can you risk not knowing what the future will bring? You know, we're so used to trying to plan everything out to the nth degree – at least, I'll admit, I am. What would it mean to give up that control to God?

Sure, it might be scary, but God promises it will be more than we can ever imagine – more joy, more fulfillment, more peace, more love – more.

Friends, I don't know exactly where each one of you is on your faith journey, whether you're stuck in head knowledge mode, or whether you've given yourself over fully to Christ, and his will for your life. But I do know this. The life to which God calls us is abundant and rich and full and eternal. And it's there for the asking. All we have to do is let go of our need for control, and let Jesus in. All we have to do is be "born again."

So, I want to invite us to a time of prayer now. Like Nicodemus, let us approach Jesus and speak with him. But then, listen too. Listen to him standing at the door of your heart knocking, and if you've never done so, let him in today – be born again.

Let us pray in silence.