

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

March 12, 2017

Rev. John F. Koerner

First Presbyterian Church

Clarksburg, WV

John 3:1-17

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 N.R.S.V.)

Nicodemus

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Nicodemus. It was a common enough name in my time. But I take a certain pride in the fact that I am the only Nicodemus who made it into your Bible. I get mentioned three times in the Gospel of John. But it is the first mention that I want to talk to you about today.

Anyone who knew me at the time would have thought that I had it made. I was rich, in fact I was very rich indeed. I was a respected pharisee. I served on the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court. Everyone knew that I was a very Godly man. I tried very hard to keep all of the Jewish laws and to be a good example to others. Mostly importantly for me, I was a teacher. Some even said that I was “the” teacher. All the important people in town wanted me to teach their children.

My name, Nicodemus, means conqueror of the people. I really should have been named conqueror of knowledge. I was one of the most knowledgeable teachers in the world. Yet for all of that, I felt like something was missing. According to every standard of my time, I was a great success. Why then did I feel so empty?

I had been hearing about a new teacher in town. His name was Jesus. Some people said that he was a bit far out in his teachings. Some said that he was a dangerous radical. Yet, there was no denying the power of his teachings. People were being transformed and renewed. I watched some of his followers and there was something that they had, that I desperately wanted. I couldn't even put my finger on what it was, I just knew that I wanted what they had.

So one day, I decided that I needed to go have a talk with Jesus. I, yes, I definitely wanted to do that. It was night before I finally got around to actually seeking him out. Much has been made about the fact that I came to see Jesus in the night. People say that I was afraid to be seen with him, that I was worried about my reputation. Maybe there was some truth to those accusations on a sub conscious level. I don't know. From my perspective it was much simpler than that. I was busy teaching all day. I am a very busy man. It was night before I got a chance to go meet with Jesus.

On the way there, I rehearsed in my head all of the things I was going to ask him and I had come up with quite an impressive list, if I do say so myself.

Jesus was staying at one of the poorer houses in town. I found them all sitting around on the floor. I was invited in and I sat down on the floor as well. I was used to being the one who was sitting in a chair while all my students sat on the floor at my feet. Still I wasn't too proud to sit on the floor, "When in Rome and all of that."

By the time I got seated everyone was looking at me, some of them even knew who I was. So I decided to start right in. I started in by saying to Jesus, "Everyone knows that you are a teacher sent from God, no one can do the signs you have done without God's help."

As I drew breath to ask my first question, Jesus said, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." He might as well have said, "Ice cream has no bones" or "There are no screen doors on submarines." That just didn't track at all. I the great teacher was suddenly reduced to stammering, "Wait, what? How? That's impossible. Are we supposed to crawl back into our mamma's womb and be born all over again?"

Jesus just smiled. Then he explained that one had to be born both physically and spiritually. Everyone gets born physically, that is the first thing that happens in physical life. So also one must be born spiritually or from above, to order to find spiritual life.

"No wait, why? How?" I seemed to be saying that a lot that night. So tell me the steps. What must I do and when and how to make this happen?"

Jesus said, you don't control it. You don't make it happen. You can't see it happening. The Spirit of God is like the wind. The wind blows when and where it wants to. You can hear it, but you can't control it.

"No wait, why? How?" I swear my head was starting to hurt. It was like being told that the whole mathematical system had changed, $2 + 2 = 5$ and you can figure out from there.

Jesus laughed out loud. It wasn't a mocking laugh, it was the kind of laugh that warms your heart and assures you that loved. He said, "You are over thinking this, o great teacher!" This isn't something that you take apart piece by piece and see how it all works. You don't have to understand how God is doing things, you just accept it.

Let me give you an example he said. You remember that time in the wilderness that the Israelites were being bitten by poisonous snakes? (Of course I did, I had studied all the scriptures) The people were dying from the snake bites. So Moses cried out to the Lord and God had him make a bronze serpent and put it on the top of a pole. When the people who were snake bit looked at the pole, God healed them. Can you tell me how that worked? That sounds impossible, right? But many of God's works are impossible. Yet we accept and believe that happened.

There will come a time, Jesus went on, when I will be lifted up and whoever believes in me, will have eternal life.

Okay, so now we were getting to it. I could sense it, even if I couldn't wrap my mind around it. I said, I am still confused, say more please.

Jesus said, "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."

I was still confused, but oddly enough, it didn't bother me as much. I felt accepted, welcomed in as I never had before. After Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected from the dead, this made a whole lot more sense.

Jesus was saying that it is part of the human condition- brought on by sin- for us to be lost and confused. Yet, God loves us enough that he will not leave us to face these things alone. In Jesus we see God coming to our rescue. God coming to help us.

Jesus also said, and I think this is so very important, "God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved by him." I think that is one of the most overlooked verses in your Bible. So many people think that God is like some sadistic monster, setting us up to fail and then delighting in punishing us. But God does not want to hurt us. God loves us and wants to rescue us.

So enough about me, here are some of the things that I learned that night.

1. Don't be afraid to ask why? And how? I had reached the point in my life where I thought I knew everything. But when I asked, Jesus surprised me with new revelation. Jesus says elsewhere that we are to come to him like a little child. Children as every parent knows are not afraid to ask questions. Questions are how we learn.
2. The second thing I learned was that God doesn't just sort of love me, God loves me enough to die for me. Somehow that had never really sunk in before.
3. The third thing I learned was that I really want to spend eternity with God. Not just to get to heaven and escape hell. Maybe you have encountered someone in life that you really like to spend time with. That person just makes you feel good about yourself, accepted, and valued. Jesus made me feel that way times a million. I want to spend eternity with him.

Amen.