

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: John 3:1-17

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.
² He 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 unless God is with that person.”³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”
⁴ Nicodemus 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?”
⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’⁸ The 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.”
⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the 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.¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that 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.
“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.

Our youngest grandson, Phineas, who is about six years old, is a very inquisitive little boy. If he has one question about something, you can count on there being ten more questions. At one time the questions may have been the dreaded and tiresome, one-word questions—“Why?” As he has grown older his questions are more focused.

Phin, these days, wants to know how things work. Last weekend Don, our sons and Phineas were at our cabin to do some work. Several trees had fallen and needed to be cut and the area where they fell, cleaned up. Our little guy was in his glory as he had the responsibility of driving the four-wheeler, pulling a small trailer loaded with the cut wood, to the wood pile. He was curious about the splitter they used to break down the logs into smaller pieces. He asked about different levers on the splitter, like the one Pap used to fit the log into the machine so it could be cut. He asked many questions, not to be annoying, but to learn. I can just picture in my mind’s eye, Don and our sons working, and trying to squeeze in answers to Phin’s questions.

Questions are not a bad thing. It’s a part of the learning and growing process, not only as they relate to and shape our human experience but also to our spiritual selves. The text that was read to us this morning, tells us about a man named Nicodemus who came to Jesus with some questions about Jesus’ teachings.

Nicodemus was a very knowledgeable man, about religious matters. We are told he was a Pharisee. Pharisees were a select group who took a pledge to spend their entire lives observing every detail of the law. This was not an easy task. We find the law in the first five books of the Old Testament. They believed these writings to be the perfect law of God and it was a sin to change them. Believing the Law to be the perfect word and instruction of God also meant that it contained everything a person needed to live a good life.

With this in mind, it became important to the Jews that each law be broken down into finer points defining the intent of the law as it was to be carried out in the daily lives of the people. This made the law a legal document of by-laws and regulations. It became a monstrosity of ridiculous laws nearly impossible to fulfill.

One of the most important laws for the Jews surrounded the command of keeping the Sabbath. Working on the Sabbath was forbidden. Detailed laws were written to help everyone know what was considered work. An example of one of the laws for keeping the Sabbath, as described by William Barclay in his commentary of the Gospel of John involves the tying of knots.

Barclay writes, "To tie a knot on the Sabbath was to work, but even a knot had to be defined. 'The following are the knots the making of which renders a man guilty; the knot of camel drivers and that of sailors; and as one is guilty by reason of tying them, so also of untying them.' On the other hand knots which could be tied or untied with one hand were quite legal.

Further, 'a woman may tie up a slit in her shift and the strings of her cap and those of her girdle, the straps of shoes or sandals, of skins of wine or oil.' Now see what happened. Suppose a man wished to let down a bucket into a well on the Sabbath day. He could not tie a rope to it, for a knot on a rope was illegal on the Sabbath; but he could tie it to a woman's girdle and let it down, for a knot in a girdle was quite legal. That was the kind of thing which to the scribes and Pharisees was a matter of life and death; that was religion; that to them was pleasing and serving God."

I'm telling you this to point out the nature of Nicodemus' background. He believed in God with a passion and wanted to do everything possible to please God. He sought to live every moment in obedience to the law, crazy as it was, to glorify God and have God's favor on him. Following the details of the law was a heavy responsibility of a Pharisee as he was then also an example for the ordinary Jews to follow.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus, set himself apart from the ordinary life. He was highly respected for his obedience to the Law. It would seem from a Pharisee's point of view, that all was right in his life. Yet, something drew him to Jesus.

Knowing these things about Nicodemus' background, we can assume then that along with the questions he had for Jesus, Nicodemus brought, all of his preconceived beliefs, his baggage of feelings (including the feeling of power and authority given him by the people who recognized him as a religious leader) and all of his life experiences.

We do the same thing as we approach Jesus and the scriptures with our questions. We bring with us the understandings of scripture as it has been taught to us by our parents, Sunday School teachers, youth workers and pastors. Admittedly, not everyone is fortunate to have Christian mentors in their lives to teach biblical lessons. But there is always something that plants seeds of teaching, rightly or wrongly, Christian or non-Christian as they may be, into the soil of people's lives, that then grow into their beliefs and shape who they are. Even as Christians, our beliefs can be influenced and shaped by the same beliefs, rhetoric and teachings

the nonbeliever hears. So then, like Nicodemus we approach Jesus and the Word with a confluence of knowledge, feelings and experiences.

The scripture tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. There might be two explanations for this. He may have come at night because he didn't want to be seen. He was a well-known man with an image to keep, and fearing the possibility that he might discover Jesus to be a bogus religious fanatic, he didn't want to be caught seen with him.

The other possible reason is based on the belief of the rabbis that the best time to study, reflect on and learn from the law was at night when one was not disturbed by other disruptions. I totally get that one. Some of my best thoughts for sermons, children's times and other lessons come to me at night when I am relaxed and as I am falling asleep.

In Nicodemus' case, he knew Jesus was most often surrounded by crowds of people, so he would have wanted to speak to Jesus, to ask his questions to Jesus when they would not be disturbed. Trying to figure out why he approached Jesus when he did, really isn't the important issue here. What is remarkable here is that he came in the first place. Perhaps this suggests to us that Nicodemus knew something **was** missing in his life and he wondered if this man, a man seeming to be of God, with new ideas might have something that could satisfy the void he felt.

Nicodemus begins their conversation with an indirect question, stating that Jesus is recognized as a teacher who has come from God, and the evidence is found through the miracles Jesus has done, none of which would be possible unless the man came from God.

Jesus responded, first by saying that this is true; but then he presented the statement, "unless a man is reborn from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Isn't it just like Jesus to either answer a question with a question; or to make a statement that stirs-up more questions to be asked. Nicodemus comes back with the silly question, how can one be reborn when one is old, he certainly cannot crawl back into his mother's womb? Surely, even Nicodemus knew that was ridiculous.

Now, lest we think that Nicodemus knew nothing about the meaning of rebirth, we would be wrong. Jews knew all about rebirth. When someone from another faith became a Jew, following through with the proper protocol, a person was considered reborn. Everything about their life, including their sins prior to that time were forgotten. The person was considered a new person, a different person.

Yet, Nicodemus pushes forward with another question, perhaps indicating a desperate desire to find meaning in Jesus' words, for his own life. In his own mind he had been a faithful man of God, doing everything right, according to the Law, but he felt something was missing. His somewhat silly question was not what it appears to be on the surface. It's a confession of sorts, knowing change; or being born anew, is necessary, but then, finding it impossible for him to do. In essence he is saying that the "'same-old, same-old' just isn't cutting it anymore, Jesus, help me."

The same can be said for people today, seeking meaning for their lives. People sensing there must be more to life than their day-in and day-out existence. Christians may even begin to feel like Nicodemus. They've studied God's Word. They feel they do all the right things and when they mess up, they ask for forgiveness. They go to church and church activities regularly. And still, something seems to be missing. A felt need for change is strong, but making the change seems impossible.

I think Jesus tries to help Nicodemus recognize that he was looking for answers up until this point in time, from an earthly, physical perspective. He was seeking meaning and connections with God through knowledge, rituals and earthly logic. As Jesus appeals to

Nicodemus' seeking, he points Nicodemus towards God's kingdom, which in fact is more than an earthly kingdom or an earthly perspective. It is a spiritual kingdom. He tells Nicodemus that the answers he longed for would be found only in God's kingdom, not an earthly kingdom, but a spiritual kingdom. This is the kingdom, Jesus says, Nicodemus needed to be born into.

Jesus says, God's kingdom is built on God's love for all people. He says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," indicating God's love for everyone is deeper and greater than anything imaginable. It is a love that answers all questions, but one needs to accept that love by having faith and trusting God.

Jesus says that God sent his Son to save the world. He came to wash away sin and breathe new life into those who come to him. In this we hear Jesus speak of grace in connection with God's love. He's pointing out that there is nothing that we can do to earn God's love. Knowledge, **having all the answers to those hard spiritual questions**, rituals, good deeds do not get us into God's kingdom, where knowing God's amazing love abounds.

Oh, there will always be questions that stir our souls and even challenge our faith...and that's okay. Because God loves us so much, he doesn't mind our questions. When offered with genuine openness for Godly answers; or when asked knowing the answers may for some reason remain a mystery to us, all the while trusting God with what is unknown to us, our questions can be a sign to God that we are seeking him, wanting to know him more and desiring a closer walk with our Savior in Godly ways.

Our questions may open doors for us, as we can assume they did for Nicodemus. We read later in John 19:39, that Nicodemus, upon learning of Jesus's death, brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing a hundred pounds for his body. Such an expensive gift surely was given because of the new life Nicodemus must have found after talking with Jesus. Jesus must have changed his life.

So, go to Jesus with your questions. You will not be rejected when you genuinely seek him out. In all the answers you receive and even in those that you don't receive, you will find God's unconditional and undeniable love, pointing you in the right direction, sometimes requiring a change in you, and drawing you closer to him in his glorious Kingdom now and for all eternity. God's love answers all your questions with all that you need to know. Amen.