

“He Thought He Knew”

Message by DD Adams

Providence United Methodist Church

Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 6, 2014

The gospel lesson for today is taken from the book of John, chapter 3, verses 1 through 17. I'll be reading from the New Revised Standard Version. Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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 apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 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?”

Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “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. This is God’s word for God’s people. Thanks be to God.

Let’s pray. Holy God, whose presence surrounds us every moment, touch our hearts and minds. Help us to listen with our hearts as we engage our inquiring minds as Nicodemus did. Grant us courage to ask questions and hear the truth in a different way. The wind blows, we see the evidence, we hear the sound of it, but we don’t know where it comes from or where it goes. Move in us today to receive from your Spirit. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, and a member of the Sanhedrin—a court made up of 70 members. You could say it was the Supreme Court of the Jews. He was man with excellent credentials. He was intelligent and cautious. Who knows why he came to Jesus in the night. Maybe he had trouble falling asleep—tossing and turning. He’d been thinking about this teacher or Rabbi Jesus; it was disturbing to him. He’d heard about how Jesus turned the water into wine. He watched him cleanse the temple for those making business deals. All these signs; it made him nervous. Part of his job in the religious world was to examine the actions of anyone suspected of being a false prophet.

Fact is he was beginning to doubt everything he’d ever learned and believed. He felt like he’d just begun to figure it all out. He prided himself in being so logical and rational and objective, but now he wasn’t sure of himself. He thought

he had covered all the bases in life. Crossed every T and dotted every I—then comes along this guy named Jesus. He completely turned his tables upside down. But it was obvious he was from God.

In his conversation with Jesus that night, it was that *one thing* Jesus said to him that really got him—that part about being born from above or born anew. What’s that all about? Jesus was describing a radical second birth, but what did it mean when Jesus said you can’t “see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” I can hear Nicodemus thinking, “You mean all this work I’ve done, all this toil and study. Have I missed the boat? Maybe you’re thinking the same. You say, “I’ve recited all the creeds, joined the church, graduated from Sunday school, been baptized and confirmed, repented of my sin once a month during Holy Communion, and served *long enough long ago*.” Nicodemus doubted that what he’d done all these years wasn’t good enough.

And now he totally didn’t get what this man from God was saying to him. He thought maybe Jesus was saying he’d have to go back into his mother’s womb and be born all over again. But Jesus said no, that’s not what it’s about. Nicodemus had this blank look on his face. He couldn’t seem to move out of his one-dimensional world. Jesus said you must be born again.

Nicodemus thought in a one-dimensional world, a shallow world—where flesh—which is what we are—means that we live our lives by *our* control and *our* self-sufficiency. We maintain a strong handle on all our decision making. In so many words, we’re resistant to the power of God to change us.

Nicodemus senses that something is wrong with his life. I get the idea he’s exploring other ways of thinking with Jesus, but he’s stuck Have you been there? Have you wanted to change, but you can’t? That’s how it was for Nicodemus. The problem was he still wanted to be who he’d always been.

Now maybe he thinks it's too late. He's too old. He's not sure he really wants to change anyway. He thinks, "After all, life has worked pretty well for me being who I am. All my needs are met—at least at this point in my life."

Yea know what Nicodemus isn't going anywhere in the Spirit realm unless he can surrender to God. All his knowledge, his high IQ, his position, all he has. It's not what he needs. What he *needs* to do is surrender his will and heart to God, because it's God who will bring an action from above to work the inner change he needs.

How about you? Have you received spiritual life from God through personal faith and trust in Jesus? Faith, it doesn't collect evidence or come up with coherent and rational conclusions. It's not about what we've done or will do. Fact is, we can never do or be enough. We'll never meet the standard we think we need to be. It's not about acts of devotion or one's ability to know Scripture and interpret it. It's not law-keeping or how hard we work for God in the church. It's about surrendering. It's about saying we can't do it on our own. It's about admitting we need Jesus. We need the wind of the Spirit to blow over us and bless us

Let's pray. God who is with us every moment, touch our hearts today. We open up to you. We confess; we can't do what we need on our own. We need supernatural and divine power to come down from above. We want to change and surrender our will, but we need you to help us do it If that's where you're at this morning, please come forward. Surrender to God; it's the only way.