

John 3:1-5, 14-21

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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.’ ³Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ ⁴Nicodemus 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?’ ⁵Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that 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.

¹⁷‘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. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’

Accept – Deeds exposed in the light.

Sympathizing with Nicodemus

I remember when I was in graduate school seeking a degree in psychology, a degree that I never earned, I worked as a banquet server at the Hotel Jefferson in Richmond, Virginia. If you ever see the movie “Gone with the Wind” the staircase in the atrium of the hotel was used as Rhett Butler’s mansion’s main staircase, and you know that it’s a fancy hotel because it’s called “The Hotel Jefferson” and not “The Jefferson Hotel.” Anyways, I was a banquet server there which was easier than being a waiter and paid about the same when your tips were added, and it helped me pay for the apartment I was living in as I was studying part time. And it was while I was working as a banquet server at the Hotel Jefferson that I discovered a great paradox about work. In the several years that I worked there, the position of Banquet Manager was filled by different people as one manager left and another person took that person’s place, and when the position was open the Personnel Manager would ask several of the banquet servers if they were interested in the position, and I remember I was one person who was asked. When I mentioned it to the woman I was dating, who was also a banquet server, she strongly encouraged me NOT to take the position, because it was common knowledge among the more seasoned banquet servers that if you are “promoted” to Banquet Manager your hours get longer and your pay actually decreases. True enough Banquet Managers made more per hour, but they didn’t get tips. Instead they got headaches in having to be accountable for the performance of the not only the banquet servers but the cooks and other staff as well. So to *accept* a promotion meant added responsibilities and less pay. By the way I also learned that several other banquet servers had been asked if they wanted the position of banquet manager, so it wasn’t such an *honor* to be the fifth of sixth person asked if I was interested in the position.

The reason I tell you story is that it relates to the lives of anyone who sincerely *accepts* Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. To *accept* Jesus is not something to get too proud over, because what you are accepting is not a free ticket to paradise but as I mentioned before the reading of the scripture, you're accepting the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. During our Epiphany worship series we heard Jesus teach us to change our entire way of thinking, because even *thinking* about adultery was the same to him as *committing* adultery, even *thinking* angry thoughts about another person was the same as murdering them. He told us to treat our enemies lovingly and pray for those who persecute us. These are requirements that come with title "Christian." But unfortunately many in the church have rewritten our job descriptions to instead say that some verbal confession as to Jesus' identity as God Incarnate is the only job requirement. Their motto is "Saved by grace through faith," which they interpret to mean that we are all completely unqualified to be employees of God, but as long as we hold the right beliefs we'll keep our jobs. That doesn't sound like a very good arrangement to me, and it's not the arrangement that God intends for us. God wants us free and empowered. But we are reluctant, as Nicodemus was, to accept that freedom and that power.

In our Gospel story today, Nicodemus, a well-educated leader of the Jewish religion, comes to Jesus because of the *signs* he's seen, that is, *the things Jesus has been doing*- healing the sick fixing the broken. Nicodemus recognizes this **power** as coming from God. The problem is that Jesus is rocking the religious boat by breaking with custom and tradition – healing on the Sabbath, forgiving sins when it was believed that only God *himself* could forgive sins. In other words Jesus was acting outside of his boundaries as determined by the religious authorities – that's why Nicodemus, himself a religious authority – came to see Jesus *at night*, under cover of darkness, so that his colleagues would not discover him. To visit Jesus was to go outside the boundaries that he himself was expected to remain within. **But Jesus, acting through the Holy Spirit, is not confined by any boundaries of religion or convention.** He's acting with both the freedom and the power that God gave and, *that God gives us*, to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in the world. This kind of power can heal the sick and make the blind see and help the lame to rise up and walk, both physically and metaphorically – people who oppress others are *blind* to their own transgressions; people who are oppressed are *crippled* by the injustices that prevent them from living life in the freedom that God intends for all of us.

So Nicodemus is in a quandary; as a religious leader and member of the Sanhedrin he enjoys the freedom and power that his human position has given him, but he is afraid to surrender that freedom and power in exchange for the *true* freedom and power that comes from the Holy Spirit. He would be giving up all that his privilege has afforded him were he to openly follow Jesus, an unlicensed preacher and physician from the boondocks of Galilee.

And so it is for too many of us today, even in the Church; to live the life that Jesus calls us to live involves too much risk for us. We accept the "freedom" and "power" that this world has handed to us, but both are constricted by our own fears. Because we are so consumed with protecting the limited power and limited freedom that we claim for ourselves, we fail to exercise the true power and live in the true freedom that the Spirit of God affords us. We're attracted to Jesus, to

the things he says and more particularly to the things he does, but we're afraid of what *real* discipleship might cost us, just as Nicodemus was.

This is why I have included a few extra verses in our reading for today; the lectionary has us stop with John 3:16, which many of you know and cherish. But if you listen to what Jesus says in verse 20 you know where I'm coming from.

...For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed...

This indicates that *it's not what we say that matters most; it's what we do!* We're all so eager to confess our faith in words, but when it comes to our deeds you would hardly know that Jesus is our Lord.

This is why Jesus speaks of being "born again" or "born from above," because the change that needs to occur in us is so radical that it really involves a complete re-formation. Nicodemus, an educated Pharisee, should have known what Jesus was talking about when he spoke of being "born again." Did he not remember what prophet Ezekiel had said, that God was going to turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh again? Did he not remember the psalmist's plea that God would create in him a clean heart? We're talking about a heart transplant here, which is along the lines of rebirth, which is what Jesus is telling Nicodemus, "Unless a person is *born anew* he will not see the kingdom of God." Not even a glimpse.

I think Jesus was truly saddened by Nicodemus' obstinance as he is saddened by our own obstinance. Jesus wants so much for us to get a glimpse of the kingdom of God, and this is why he speaks to us about the snake on the stick. Jesus says that when he is raised up, like Moses raised the serpent on the pole in the wilderness so that "whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Not knowing that Jesus would one day be raised up on a cross to free us from sin and death, Nicodemus was probably even more confused by what Jesus was telling him, *but one day he would understand*. Because perhaps our best chance of gaining a glimpse of the kingdom of God comes when we look upon the cross where Jesus dies. Perhaps it is there where we can see the climax of a life spent in complete freedom, loving according to God's perfect plan. Perhaps it is upon the cross that we see God's true power, the power to love and heal and restore that which is broken. Perhaps it is upon the cross that we can recognize the folly of our own ways, ways that would torture and kill those who stand in our way of doing things. Perhaps it is on the cross that we see the extent of God's reach as he forgives those who know not what they do.

My friends, accepting Jesus ultimately means accepting the power that God offers us to be instruments of his love in this world. That is the Christian vocation. The hours are long and the pay is not much according to the standards of this world, and once we fully accept Jesus as our Lord we are likely to find it just as difficult as Jesus did to create true disciples of Jesus Christ. But when we *fully accept Jesus we are accepting the power that comes with the Holy Spirit*, and it's a power that is capable of and ultimately will transform this entire world. When we make our confession of faith or our baptismal vow, that what we are accepting.