

John 3:1-17

¹Now 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. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The 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.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a 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. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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.

Getting Your Heart Around Jesus

1. Back in 1986 I was a psychology grad student at Virginia Commonwealth University. I was at best a mediocre undergraduate student, so I wasn’t able to make it into the clinical psychology program; instead I was in the *experimental* psychology program, which was easier to get into but as I would learn, just as difficult to complete. The truth is I never completed it. I struggled through a number of classes, barely passing some, failing others. The straw that broke this camel’s back was a class I took in the second year of graduate school called something like **neuropsychopharmacology** – I may be making that up; it could have been two classes that included all those prefixes. I remember, from the very beginning, having absolutely no clue what the texts were saying and what the professor was talking about (I was a religious studies major as an undergraduate), and needless to say **I went on to fail the class**.
2. So as I read today’s scripture lesson, I found myself **empathizing with Nicodemus** who came to visit Jesus in the dark, and doubtless was just as much in the dark when he concluded his visit. You could **hardly call this little episode a conversation**; Nicodemus makes a comment and Jesus starts speaking in riddles – you must be born again. How can you be born from above? Unless you are born of water and the spirit you won’t see the kingdom of God. How can you re-enter the womb? No one may see the kingdom unless a man be born from above. Jesus starts talking about being lifted up like a

serpent on a pole, and we don't hear anything else from Nicodemus. It's like the two are in parallel universes. It's like that old joke; how many surrealists does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: yellow.

3. We never learn if Nicodemus ever got his mind around Jesus, but it seems that **he finally got his heart around him**; the last we hear of Nicodemus is after Jesus' crucifixion, when he and Joseph of Arimathea anoint Jesus' body and place it in the tomb, an act of profound love and respect, particularly when the body that you're anointing is that of an executed criminal. Perhaps Nicodemus got his heart around the last words Jesus spoke to him; "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whosoever believes in him shall have everlasting 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."
4. **We have about as much chance of getting our mind around God as a religious studies major has of getting his mind around neuropsychopharmacology. The good news (the gospel) is that we don't need to get our minds around God; we need simply to get our hearts around him.** Children believe that their parents know everything...for awhile... and they trust their parents. That is the kind of faith we need to have in God. That's what Jesus communicates to Nicodemus; it's not a matter of understanding all the signs and wonders I've performed; it's a matter of *believing what you see and what you hear*. I wish I could have gone to my Neuropsychopharmacology professor and told him "I believe what you're teaching me," but I doubt it would have mattered. But with God, it *does* matter, because truth be told, we will never be able to comprehend God. Though we are created in his image, his intellect is far beyond our own. What we have instead is a glimpse of God in the flesh in the form of Jesus, who healed the sick and raised the dead, and **all we can do is look at him in awe and understand the one thing that Nicodemus did understand, that this man Jesus is from God.**
5. That's what Jesus calls his disciples to do, and that's what we are called to do. Watch Jesus heal the sick, feed the hungry, dwell with the poor, bring hope to the oppressed, and then die for our sins. **Our brains have a hard time with this**; his actions speak highly of him, but what we don't get is why he didn't sell out and live the comfortable life that he could have lived – a person of Jesus' skill and aptitude should have a six or seven-figure salary, a good house with a three-car garage in a good neighborhood. He should have personal assistants and servants, gardeners and a chauffeur, maybe his own Sunday morning television show. That may be what Nicodemus was thinking; he should be a Pharisee like us – an intelligent lad like Jesus would be a great leader of our faction. He should be president, or king. That's what our earthly mind tells us. Grab power, gain recognition, "get while the gettin's good." Many scholars think that's what Judas was thinking; he wasn't trying to get Jesus killed, he was just trying to force his hand to grab the power that he was so capable of grabbing. **Jesus could live in Solomon's palace**; instead look at the folks he hangs out with – why waste his time with them when there are smarter, wittier, better-educated, better dressed, better smelling people that he could hang out with, *like me?*

6. **But the heart is more important than the mind. Jesus' *abilities* impressed Nicodemus and the Pharisees – his miracles and signs amazed them. But Jesus wasn't interested in impressing anyone – he was interested in loving *everyone*.** In the end it's love that matters, not ability. It doesn't matter so much to me that God is highly intelligent; what matters is that he loves me. And God so loved the world that he chose to give totally and take nothing – he took on flesh and blood, even *poor* flesh and blood, and he accepted no status or privilege but rather came to dwell with us, and gave us his all because he loves us. **And all he wants from us is that we *believe* that with our hearts, because that's how true salvation comes; when we truly *believe* that God loves us unconditionally (because ideal love, by definition, is unconditional), we are freed from the need to understand or impress or control anyone or anything. That is when we are truly "born from above, and the love that we somehow come to believe in envelops us and transforms us, and our old *earthly* self is dead as the *heavenly* self takes over, and we in turn come to love, truly love, God.** There will be plenty about God that we, like Nicodemus, may never understand, but what has been revealed in Jesus Christ is all we need in order to believe in God's love. And once we believe in that love, our love for Jesus will come naturally.

7. Next Sunday we look at Mark 3, and we find that the lawyers from Jerusalem accused Jesus of working for the devil. Why? Because he is healing those who are tormented by unclean spirits. That's what God's love can do. Yet when those vested with earthly power feel threatened by those who exhibit God's power, a battle ensues. It reminds me of what happens in a presidential campaign when one candidate is backed up against the ropes; he starts taking wild swings against his opponent. Jesus' opponents would eventually kill him, but once again, God's love fixes what our sin breaks, and Christ is resurrected. We don't know what became of his opponents, but we can know what becomes of us, if we *believe* in what Jesus tells us, if we believe in God's unstoppable love, and once we believe it, we submit to it.