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John 3:1-17
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Nicodemus was an interesting character. He appears in today's gospel reading and again in two other places in John's gospel. He is not one of the disciples, but is known as a "secret disciple." One might celebrate Nicodemus for his courage in breaking ranks with established religion, or one might chastise Nicodemus for his lack of courage and commitment. As I look at the story of Nicodemus, I see the story of a man who God has a hold of and will not let go. I see a man who desires to know and follow Jesus, but lacks understanding and commitment. As I look at the story of Nicodemus, I see the story of most of us.

Nicodemus was an educated and religious man; he was a Pharisee. This is one of the few places where we see a Pharisee who is devout and sincere not only in his religion, but also in his faith. Nicodemus was earnest in his search for God. In today's gospel lesson, we see inside the heart and mind of this Pharisee, we see Nicodemus struggling, doubting and longing to understand Jesus.

It is interesting, also, what we don't see. We don't see Nicodemus leaving his nets behind. He doesn't immediately rush off to follow Jesus. Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness. He is curious, but he's also cautious and confused. I'm not sure why he's really there. Maybe he wants to learn from Jesus. Maybe he wants to test Jesus. Maybe he wants Jesus to know he's been thinking about all he's heard and seen Jesus do or say. Maybe he has no clue as to why he's there, just a deep longing, drawing him there. I suspect he is there because God has a hold on him and will not let go.

As Jesus tells Nicodemus about this spiritual birth, I can see Nicodemus desperately wanting to embrace Jesus' words, but they are so foreign and different from his practical and institutional way of thinking that he has no way of understanding. Nicodemus was looking for more religion, but what Jesus was offering was faith. Religion is something that we do in God's arena. Faith is what God does. How often does our own religiosity get in the way of God's truth?

Looking at the story of Nicodemus here, it bears some similarities to the story of the rich young ruler. Both men are devout, earnestly seeking to do right. Both recognize the need for something else. Both see Jesus as the key to that something else. But, the obstacle for the rich young ruler was what he was unwilling to do. The obstacle for Nicodemus was what he was unwilling to let God do. If the story ended here, then we would believe that Nicodemus left like the ruler, greatly saddened by his burden.

But the story of Nicodemus does not end here, we see Nicodemus again, and again. In the end, it is Nicodemus, who, along with Joseph of Arimathea, buries the body of Jesus. In the end when all his disciples abandon him, it is Nicodemus who is faithful to him. Legend has it that Nicodemus went on to be a great leader in the early Christian church. I believe that God had a hold on Nicodemus and would not let him go. God was slowly transforming Nicodemus into a disciple.

In this day when so many Christians when you were saved, what day, what hour did you accept Christ, we begin to think that discipleship is a one-time decision. That it comes in a flash, and transforms us forever. Wouldn't that be nice? But, I think most of us are more like Nicodemus. It

takes time for us to struggle, wrestle and gradually discover how to live out our faith. I have always been wary of that question, since few good Presbyterians have “road to Damascus” stories to share. Growing up here in the Bible belt, I was always taught to respond to that question, “Two thousand year ago, on the cross.” That statement is, of course, true. But looking again at this text that coined the phrase “born again Christian,” I am beginning to rethink spiritual birth, and my own answer to that dreaded question. While I do believe, in fact, that Christ died once and for all for my sins on the cross, for all of our sins, I do not believe that that singular event was the end of God’s salvific activity. I believe that God is still at work in the lives of God’s people. I believe, by the grace of God, that I am “born again” each day, as God continues to mold and shape me into the person God has created me to be.

Like most of us, Nicodemus had many obstacles to over-come in becoming a disciple.

- First, he was wealthy; Jesus has plenty to say about riches and entering the kingdom of heaven.
- Also, Nicodemus was powerful and had rank among the Jewish authorities. Jesus has plenty to say about the powerful.
- Finally, Nicodemus was a man of common sense. Jesus asked his disciples to be foolish.

At different times in our lives, I think we struggle with many the same obstacles. Yet, God keeps working on us, helping us grow more sure and bold in the faith. Discipleship is a life-long journey, and as Shannon is fond of saying, the question is not, “Are we there yet?” but “Are we moving in the right direction?”

What “born again” in the gospel means, however, is literally to begin all over again, to be given a second birth, a second chance. The one who is born again doesn’t all of a sudden get turned into a super-Christian, for we are all born as infants, with much growth and possibilities before us. To be born again is to enter afresh into the process of spiritual growth. It is to wipe the slate clean. It is to cancel your old mortgage and start again. In other words, you don’t always have to be what you are right now. Such an offer is too good to be true for many, it’s confusing for most, but for those who seek to be more faithful, those who want to know God more fully, God is still at work, renewing us in the Spirit with each new day.