April 9, 2017
Lesson 6: John 3: 1-21
God's Saving Love in Christ

Context:

Today we meet one of the most interesting characters in the Gospels; the Pharisee named Nicodemus. In the Gospel of John, we hear about Nicodemus three different times in very important phases of Jesus' ministry. Our scripture lesson this morning is the first time that we meet Nicodemus.

In the first few chapters of John, we do not hear as much about Jesus' birth or lineage. Instead we learn that he is the Word become flesh and that his ministry is one about proving that he is the Son of God, the Messiah. In chapter one, he is baptized, collects his followers, and establishes himself as the Son of God. In chapter two, he turns water into wine at a wedding, turns illegal tables in Jerusalem at the Temple, and already prophesizes to leaders about his identity in cryptic terms that may get them to start stroking their chins. Some he gives great clues to who he may be, while others he avoids because he knows that they are not trustworthy and will create havoc with this revelation.

And thus we meet Nicodemus, a Pharisee who comes to him in the night. We don't know why Nicodemus comes at night. It could be because he is afraid to be seen by the other leaders for hangout out with a rebel rouser. Maybe that's the only time he could get away from the synagogue or Temple. Or maybe that's the only time that Jesus is alone and Nicodemus could ask the questions that are on everyone's mind.

What follows is what can be considered a cryptic conversation that we ourselves may have to read a few times to understand. (Or at least if you're like me that's what I had to do when I preached on this several weeks ago.) There is a conversation about being born anew, the water and spirit, a weird reference about Moses' bronze snake in the wilderness, and the true nature of Jesus' identity. Nicodemus, a teaching Pharisee, gets a new lesson where he himself has to learn new terms and ideas. He is the first to hear about who Jesus is and what Jesus has come to do for all of humanity. Jesus is the Son of God who has come so that others may believe in him and be delivered from sin and death.

After this passage ends, we don't hear whether Nicodemus is changed or not. We don't even get a response to Jesus' words. But he pops up two more times in the Gospel of John. In chapter 7, we hear of Nicodemus speaking up for Jesus when the Jewish leaders are seeking a reason to arrest him. And after Jesus dies on the cross in chapter 19, we hear that Nicodemus is at Jesus' tomb with myrrh and aloe to help bury him. This inquisitive soul was there each step of Jesus' journey in this Gospel all the way from the beginning to the end.

Application:

The more I study Nicodemus, the more I love his story. For some years and some denominations, people don't know what to do with Nicodemus. He's not like the other disciples because he doesn't exactly follow Jesus. He's not there at the miracles and he's not at the Last Supper. We never know what Nicodemus thought about Jesus or if he actually believed that Jesus was the true Son of God.

Other people focus more on the conversation, especially John 3:16 which has

replaced John 11: 35 (Jesus wept), as the most memorized verse. We love to hear about Tim Tebow using it as his theme verse or seeing billboards that help us understand this is the core of what we believe as Christians. God loved our world so much that he gave his only Son, so that we may believe in him and not perish, but have eternal life. Jesus has come for the whole world so that we may live. It's a beautiful passage of scripture and one that we should repeat over and over, especially to those who are new to the faith. Jesus came so that you might live; he's given you new life.

But I find a lot of comfort in the character of Nicodemus in this story as well. Nicodemus wasn't afraid to ask hard questions. He wanted to know the truth and he was going to get real with Jesus. Even when he didn't understand and even when he was confused, he kept asking Jesus about what he meant. And time and time again, he shows up to be Jesus' advocate and to even help bury him. He may not be sure about everything with Jesus, but he seems to know that Jesus is special. As a result, he keeps coming back for more. The first person Jesus reveals himself to definitively as the Messiah is the Samaritan woman in the fourth chapter of John. But Jesus gives a lot of hints to Nicodemus that keeps him stroking his beard and watching, even if it is at a safe distance.

What questions do you have for Jesus? I think this text helps us understand that we may be like Nicodemus and have a lot of questions about our world and what Jesus is doing in our midst. The good news is that we don't have to do anything or respond immediately. Jesus did that by coming to the world and giving of himself so that we may live. His redeeming work was done in his ministry through his sermons, his miracles, and on the road to Calvary that culminated with his death on a cross. Keeping to his word, he rose three days later. He gave us hope that keeps us moving every day; resurrection changes things.

Maybe that's what Jesus was doing in that conversation with Nicodemus. He was essentially communicating to Nicodemus that it was okay to have questions and to stroke our chins and ponder things. In the midst of it all, Jesus is holding us. He keeps on doing his thing and all he asks is that we trust and believe in him, listening and praying over his words, and seeking to do little things along the way that mirror his own ministry. Asking questions and having an inquisitive mind about something we think God has put on our heart. Speaking out against injustice when we see people being hurt and saying: "No. That's not right." Comforting people when they're sick by bringing a meal or in death being that shoulder for the person who has lost a loved one. And leaving the rest up to Jesus, the one who continues to give new life.

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