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8 March 2020—Second Sunday in Lent  
John 3:1-17

# Inquiring Minds

The Rev. Lynn Johnson had one of the best, most effective children's sermons I have ever seen. He gathered the children around a small box. Told them it would show them the secret of who God loved. Then he asked them to look in the box—one at a time—but not to reveal the secret until he told them to.

A quick peek was almost universally followed by smiles and wiggles. When the last child had her look, Lynn asked a simple question, "Who does God love?" All the children shouted, "ME!"

The bottom of the box had a mirror taped in it—when it was their turn, each child saw their own reflection.

One of my seminary professors was a die-hard fan of "Touched by an Angel"—you may remember the show — Della Reese and Roma Downey and John Dye as heavenly messengers.

The theology was simple, and the message was the same each: God has not forgotten you, God loves you, God is with you — in the depths of crises, in the midst of brokenness, in the darkness of despair — God is with us.

My professor was **CONVINCED** that the whole world needed to hear this message on an endless loop. That WE needed to hear this message on endless loop. She believed in the power of love to redeem and transform the world.

This is what we promise to teach our children at baptism; This is what we need to teach each other; This is what we promise to teach the world — that we and all of God's creation are beloved by God.

John's gospel invites us into the story of Nicodemus, as he takes his turn at the mirror.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus practiced deep obedience to the laws and rituals and worship of God. He comes to Jesus under the cover of night, cloaked by more than the darkness. He is wrapped in the power and prestige as a leader of the Judean elite who govern Israel under the watchful eye of Rome.

He begins the conversation by calling Jesus, "Rabbi." This is transliterated Hebrew meaning "my teacher..." Not just "teacher" by "MY teacher."

He comes with his own reassuring message, "We have known that you have come from God..." He is telling Jesus that the ruling party—the members of the Sanhedrin—have seen his signs and miracles, and they have seen the light.

They "know" that God's power is with Jesus.

Nicodemus has come — like some sage elder — offering to extend the mantle of his respectability over Jesus. His mission: to invite Jesus into the existing order of religious power.

As you can imagine, this did NOT go well.

I can feel the tension mounting in the silence stretching between Jesus and Nicodemus. Silence, finally broken as Jesus says, “Listen — this is really important — no one can see the reign of God unless they are being born again, from above.”

Nicodemus mistakes this as the first statement in some sort of intellectual, rabbinic debate. And, he’s sooooo got this. Taking the most literal meaning of “born again” Nicodemus gets a little snarky, “Is it possible to go back into the womb and be born a second time?”

But Jesus doesn’t step up to the debating stage. Again, he says, “Listen — this is really important — unless one is born of water and spirit that one is unable to enter the reign of God...”

Without blinking, Jesus tells this deep practitioner of godly obedience, even the most righteous among a sect that lives and breathes the law, will not enter God’s kingdom without a complete spiritual makeover.

Emmanuel Lartey writes, “rebirth is a spiritual experience available to all, but perhaps MOST NEEDED by religious people who might think they [don’t] need it.”<sup>1</sup>

Confused by the idea that he should change, Nicodemus wonders aloud, “How can these things be?”

The story of Nicodemus comes to us through the polished lens of John’s gospel. Written years after the crucifixion and resurrection, this witness comes after Jerusalem’s temple has been destroyed and during a time when Jewish religious leaders are pushing Christ-followers out of the synagogues.

We know that in the days of the early church, the most responsive followers of Jesus were those on the margins. The power of the gospel and its vision of God’s kingdom was deeply appealing to the least, the last, and the lost. The gospel of Jesus Christ spoke a word of liberation, preaching “good news to the poor... release to the captives... sight to the blind... freedom to the oppressed... the year of the Lord’s favor” (Lk 4:18-19).

John shapes this story, polishing its imagery and theology with decades of communal practice and witness testimony. So as Jesus once again speaks to Nicodemus, we hear the experience of that entire community: “Listen — this is really important — WE speak of what WE know, testify to what WE have seen; yet you do not receive OUR testimony.”

Nicodemus doesn’t truly understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. He hasn’t yet experienced the power of healing, been cleansed from disease, restored from a birth defect, or regained his sight. He and the Sanhedrin consider these miracles as power they can adopt and tame to their use. Only the people who’d experienced Jesus’ healing and transformation who might’ve told them what those “signs” of power really meant.

I am reminded that when we lose sight of the gospel, we can always find it at the margins. Gospel truth is most powerfully spoken by people who understand its liberating hope.

Howard Thurman once wrote,

“Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed. That it became, through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and the dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus... Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage.”<sup>2</sup>

“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” (Jn 3:16-17).

This is the litany of our lives: this message of love and salvation standing at the center of John’s gospel. It’s so powerful that John 3:16 has become a cultural icon in America.

We see sporting evangelists in every arena, holding signs that read “John 3:16.” Tim Tebow wore this verse in his anti-glare eye black. It’s so engraved in our culture that the rainbow-wigged, John 3:16 t-shirt wearing proselyte has even been made a character on the Simpsons.

“For God so loved the world...”

Even our children learn to sing the song, “Jesus loves me, this I know...”

Yet, with all these witnesses, there are some days that I can scarcely hold onto the words. I lose sight — and perhaps we all lose sight — of the power and the promise in this simple truth.

Who does God love? God loves the whole of the cosmos the entirety of creation. **AND** God loves people — the least, the last, the lost; **you and me and the Pharisee.**

Emmanuel Lartey wants us to remember the words of Jesus: “to be in tune with God’s reign and presence we all need a transformative overhaul of our traditional ways of seeing and being... a transformation of our whole way of knowing and experiencing the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Week by week, we seek to share God’s love in concrete ways — by sharing food for the AMEN Pantry, by working the aisles at Second Chance, by helping neighbors in need. We gather around those who grieve, take casseroles to the recovering, support each other during times of emotional upheaval. We make calls and visits and send cards and letters.

This is gospel: when we seek to share God’s love, we meet the ones who teach us what God’s love is all about.

Their witness can transform our compassion into the headwaters of justice. For Jesus invites us all into God’s reign—to live as God’s people responding to God’s love with love of our own.

You might call this “the rest of the story.” Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night —afraid to risk a daylight encounter with this worker of wonders. If this was all we knew of Nicodemus, we might dismiss him. Yet, we will meet Nicodemus again.

As the Pharisees seek to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus calls for a fair hearing. From his position of power, he believes that the law will give impartial judgment to the one he calls “my teacher.” His pharisaic associates scoff, accusing him of partisanship, of “being Galilean.”

Finally, we meet Nicodemus at the foot of cross. He and Joseph of Arimathea remove Jesus’ body for burial. By his actions, Nicodemus becomes unclean, unable to celebrate the sacred Passover. He gives up the privilege and power of his position in the community and aligns himself in radical solidarity as a follower of the Christ.

Nicodemus is transformed by the Spirit of God’s love.

God loves. This is the heart of John’s gospel. This love is our invitation... to be made new and to carry God’s message of love to the world in deeds of justice and mercy and hope. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Lartey, Emmanuel. “Pastoral Perspective on John 3:1-17.” *Feasting on the Word*. Yr B, Vol 3. (Louisville, KY: WKJ; 2009). 46.

<sup>2</sup> Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. (Boston, MA: Beacon; 1976). 18.

<sup>3</sup> Lartey. 46.