

Providence Presbyterian Church
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John 3: 1-17

Who is the character that then when appearing in a joke, you know that they are going to be the foil? Growing up we told jokes where it culminated with the polish person. My wife, growing up in Texas knew the same jokes, but “Aggies” were always the brunt of the joke. Jokes tend to leverage stereotypes and attitudes towards certain groups. We generally agree these days that characterizing a group as other and reducing them to certain negative characteristics is inappropriate and can have serious consequences, whether an ethnic group, a gender, sexual orientation, political party, and so on. However, there are times that stories rely on broad brush strokes in order to give you background information quickly. In the gospels, when we hear certain key words describing groups, we know something about them without knowing them, without having faces or back-stories. For example, the title Pharisee typically has a negative connotation in the gospels. They are the foils, the bad guys, the ones tied to negative traits. We hear often, in broad strokes, about the scribes and the pharisees, or the priests and the Pharisees.

Now, there is a reason for this. Jesus comes up through Judaism. He is trained and reared in small Jewish villages. He understands the tradition and the customs. But the vision of God’s relationship to people transcends and calls into question some of the assumptions and categories of his upbringing. He is reinterpreting the tradition and changing the landscape where all people are invited into relationship with God, and community with one another, therefore wiping away some of the distinctions and separations within the Jewish tradition, of which the Scribes and Pharisees are power-brokers within, and of which they are keepers and teachers.

I think of Paul’s words in Galatians. He writes: “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” These customs and divisions that had dictated who was truly a follower of God, truly one who could be in God’s promises, they no longer apply. You see, this is where Jesus is taking things.

It doesn’t have to do with whether one is a Jew or Gentile, a Jew or a Greek. These ethnic, cultural, and bodily differences don’t determine one’s place in God’s family anymore. Same goes for male and female, you all get to enter the temple rather than the women being relegated to an outer court. No longer slave or free, one

class doesn't get a closer standing with God than another. Political and power structures must be uncoupled from the matters of faith and spirituality. And one's new relationship with Christ is the standard of being part of God's promises. Paul writes, "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

Now why do I start here this morning? Because in John's gospel these themes are present, this trend in Jesus' ministry and teaching. And often it is the fringe characters who seem most open to these movements, to Jesus' reinterpretation of the Jewish tradition, and therefore are often portrayed positively. This includes woman and prostitutes and tax collectors and the blind and lame and so forth.

But those who have had the reigns of the tradition in the past, who have enjoyed privilege and authority and the best courts in the temple and the best seats at the banquet, they are the most resistant to these changes. So, in John's gospel, folks like the Samaritan woman and the man born blind are the most receptive, and the Jewish leadership and mainstream the most resistant. John talks often of the "Jews," which is really the Jewish religious leaders and establishment, not Jews as a general category, the "Jews" are resistant to Jesus. It is the Jews who plot to get rid of him, and who do, in the end, follow through on these schemes.

As the tectonic plates of power shift, it is easy to paint in broad strokes. It is easy to demonize one group and paint as valorous victims, the other. And so, this story is interesting because we poke through the generalizations for a moment. We pierce through the generalizations to see a person, humanized and with nuance and his own questions and process. Nicodemus is among those that gets painted as the villain. He is among the teachers of the law, among those that benefit from the maintaining of tradition. He is among those that are often painted as the stuck-in-the-mud ones, the problem ones, the resistant ones. He is among those that Luke's gospel calls vipers and white-washed tombs. By calling him a Pharisee, we think we know something about him already.

But as John 3 opens we get an image of someone who is open, questioning, considering. "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." He is reverent. He is discerning. He is thoughtful, entertaining questions. Rather than dismissing altogether, rather than mindlessly resisting because it will bring radical change, he considers. He seeks out Jesus and he voices his questions, expressing a spirit of openness.

In this moment, Nicodemus is humanized, he has choices, not pre-determined to act in expected ways. Now, Nicodemus doesn't speak many words in the narrative. It is Jesus who does most of the talking. But we are given the impression of someone with questions, who is being taught by Jesus, who is grappling the implications of following Jesus, not unlike the rich young ruler, who had a lot to lose.

Nicodemus expresses that part of all of us who is entrenched in certain points of view, certain patterns, particular forms of worship, particular rhythms and clean categories and familiar structures. Within all that he is certain, settled, confident. Without it all, the world is less comforting and recognizable.

And Nicodemus asks the question that we all might ask. Can we really be born anew when we have become old? Can we really change? Can we see and feel and move in new and fresh ways? Or is the story written? Are we too old, too set in our ways, too indoctrinated by talk television and political rhetoric? Are we too wounded to trust God and others again? Are we too distracted by other things to ever redirect our time and heart to greater devotion to Christ?

“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?” If you were acting out this line in a play, what tone would you use? Is the tone curious? Or is he unsettled? Or is he scoffing, making a face, undermining the legitimacy of the suggestion? What do you think? Does he want to see the world afresh, is he curious to know; or is such a prospect unsettling, or just silly and hard to take serious?

Well, the moment does tend to dissolve into a teaching moment for those words of verses 16 and 17, and God's love for all, not just Jews, or males, or any smaller category. “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.”

The truth of Jesus' message lingers as the narrative moves on. But we never hear Nicodemus' response, never get a final answer on whether he seeks that new birth, or whether he disappears back into the crowd, back into the broad-brush stereotype of the Pharisees. However, it is interesting that John does mention Nicodemus two more times. He is mentioned briefly in chapter seven as a timid counter voice to those religious leaders that are ready to get rid of Jesus. And again in chapter 19.

38 After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. 39 Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. 40 They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths.

Perhaps Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus does lead to a new birth, to him finding a new way through his tradition, through his commitments and entanglements. Perhaps he holds out hope for all of us, that an encounter with Christ is still possible. That we are not just stereotypes, so conditioned that an onlooker knows what we are going to do before we do it. Like Nicodemus, in this humanized moment, maybe we still have choices and volition, and the possibility of knowing Christ better, or being born anew, coming into the world with new possibility, a new way of seeing and being and moving as one created by God and redeemed through the Christ.

Nicodemus pops up in the story again, showing signs of how Christ is changing him. How about you? What do we see or hear next in your journey?

And all God's people said...

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He 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.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴ Nicodemus 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?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸ The 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.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus 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. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that 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.

Genesis 32: 22-32: *Jacob Wrestles at Peniel*

²² The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

