

**THE BEGINNING OF A BEAUTIFUL RELATIONSHIP; JOHN 3:1-17; MAY 27, 2018;
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Today's Scripture is familiar – not least because of that next-to-the-last verse of the passage: “That 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.”

This verse, John 3:16, often shows up on cardboard signs held by people standing behind television announcers at sports events or other broadcasts. The implication is that if you can muster the faith, the will, the “whatever it takes” to believe in Jesus you will not perish but have eternal life.

But the problem with that formula is that being saved from perishing has nothing to do with me mustering anything and everything to do with Jesus. The implication of the cardboard sign is that *my* faith, *my* will, *my* effort to believe will save me. And this is what Nicodemus is so desperately trying to escape though he doesn't yet realize it: the utter futility of thinking he is the source of his own salvation.

The story is all the more interesting because Nicodemus is a distinguished professor of the Bible; his lectures are wildly popular, his books bestsellers, his council respected and sought after. He was even awarded a MacArthur genius grant. If anyone knows how to find salvation surely it is Nicodemus.

That's why he comes to Jesus at night – so no one will see him meeting with the peasant, rabbi and conclude that the emperor has no clothes or that Nicodemus isn't the man of spiritual erudition everyone thinks he is.

But if he is not willing for others to learn the truth about him – that he is just like anyone else, a hungry beggar seeking bread – he is at least willing to acknowledge some shred of truth about himself – that he longs for something more.

Theologians have a term – prevenient grace – it means the grace that precedes the grace that opens our eyes; grace that leads us to the grace of self awareness and realization that God has been present to us all along and is present to us now and that we've been getting in the way of ourselves and consequently denying ourselves the fullness and abundance of life God intends for us.

Prevenient grace is what caused Nicodemus to close the book, leave his study and ask discretely where he might find then going to visit the rabbi from Nazareth. Nicodemus has a long way to go, spiritually, but he needed that little push to be willing to risk his reputation being seen with Jesus asking questions he was used to having others ask him.

The willingness to try something once, to say to yourself not just “I don't have all the answers” but “I need some answers.” A church member told me recently about a time when he admitted to himself that he felt empty and alone and started looking for a Christian community. Perhaps you remember a moment when you gave yourself permission to ask some questions you'd long avoided, to seek for something more for which you did not yet have a name.

We get to the point of looking beyond ourselves when the old formulas and answers no longer apply; when life throws some crisis our way or when we've been in some routine of living that suddenly feels like a rut going nowhere.

But even when Nicodemus takes the first step, he still dwells in darkness because he sees Jesus only as a bigger version of himself – “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher come from God for no one could do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” We can almost hear Nicodemus' next question: ‘Just between us Jesus, what's it all about, what's the real secret to life.’

Then, because this is the Gospel of John, before Nicodemus asks that question Jesus answers it: “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Which throws Nicodemus into a tailspin. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can anyone enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?”

But this is like one of those Zen sayings called a koan that require an answer from another dimension or realm of being; the common example of a Zen koan is ‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’ Jesus' koan about being born from above throws sand in the gears of Nicodemus' smoothly functioning theology.

Nicodemus' question about re-entering the mother's womb elicits an answer that further confuses Nicodemus – “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, you must be born from above. 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 born of the Spirit.”

Poor Nicodemus doesn't have a clue what Jesus is talking about. Jesus both rejects Nicodemus' erudition as the way to salvation and also rejects the easy answers of what had become the literal interpretation of the Law; not so very different from what liberal Christianity and evangelical faith offer us today.

Nicodemus is between a rock and a hard place, like a musician who has acquired technical skill but can't yet make music. “Water? Spirit? Being born from above? How can these things be?” he asks Jesus. To which Jesus responds incredulously, “You call yourself a teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?”

The symbol for John's Gospel is the eagle because the eagle soars high above the earth. Unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke, John portrays a supernatural, at times unearthly Jesus who reads people's minds and appears from behind locked doors. At this point, in chapter 13, the eagle is flying high: “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”

For people like us – fairly well educated, used to having answers and who get that the bible must be understood in its historical context – today's story is like getting a bad grade on our report card. Jesus tells Nicodemus he's failed.

There's no resolution, we're left hanging, scratching our heads with Nicodemus; thinking perhaps this is one biblical story we can ignore or blaming John's religious metaphors or thinking ‘not my cup of tea.’

I love and hate this story. Every time I read it I am reminded how rich the biblical tradition is, how much mystery surrounds the holy, the divine, and yet just as I sense the in-breaking of awe and wonder I realize there's nothing tangible here to hold on to; that this story is an incomplete sentence, open-ended and my usual vocabulary doesn't let me complete it; some other language is required. I try to remember: what is that language?

But there is at least this: Jesus says to Nicodemus, "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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."

Somehow, Nicodemus realizes, it's not about him and his academic titles; it's about Jesus. Jesus is the one who came from heaven. Jesus, is the one Yahweh sent out of love for the world to show and lead the world to something more. Jesus is the path of salvation.

For a man of letters to become the disciple of an unlettered rabbi is the decision Nicodemus faces. There is nothing static about faith – either it grows or it dies. Either we seek and find or we settle for something less and lose. Life will not permit us relying on the answers we found during the last siege of loneliness or loss or questioning. Even if those are the answers we hold onto this time we must learn them all over again and apply them anew to the current situation.

Although Nicodemus has been canonized, I have not heard of any churches that have taken his name. It's too bad. He might be a patron saint for many of us. While his nocturnal meeting with Jesus did not result in his being 'born anew from above' at that first meeting, Nicodemus does show up two more times; the next time is before the Sanhedrin of which he is a member and reminds them, almost like a court appointed lawyer, after they arrested Jesus that the Law allows for an accused prisoner to speak.

And then, Nicodemus shows up one more time bringing burial spices with Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus down from the cross. It's that scene that convinces me that the old frozen chosen lawyer/scholar is starting to thaw, that he has let go of thinking it's up to him to earn or figure out his salvation and that he can simply trust himself into God's hands even as his hands lift the lifeless body of Jesus.

Here's a PS to the sermon. It's Memorial Day weekend and in the wake of the longest running war in our history, the loss of life, and the suffering of returning veterans, I suspect some families and communities are observing this day with deep reverence.

Something needs to wake us up. Oddly, the frequency and toll of school shootings doesn't seem to reach us.

The politics of Washington and what appears to be the turmoil and chaos of international relations only grow more ominous.

A friend and member of this congregation told me about NPR's America Reads summer program in which the network will be sharing what listeners tell them about the books they read and how these stories affect their lives.

My friend reminded me that *The Great Gatsby* is the most popular novel in the nation and since it is his favorite he judged the last paragraph to be one of the greatest conclusions to an American novel.

So I re-read the conclusion the other day. It evokes the sense of awe and wonder those first explorers had upon coming to the virgin shores and forests of North America way back in the 16th century; indeed to Long Island where Fitzgerald's story takes place and where Gatsby's mansion looms over the horizon.

Then it juxtaposes that moment of discovery and hope for the building of a new society in a new world with the Gatsby's coming as a young man to the same Long Island shore to behold the estates, mansions and trappings of affluence of America's industrial barons that engulfed him.

Here's the point of the novel and what makes it so American: Gatsby's vision continues to sweep us up and compromises the vision of our founders.

And despite the wreckage of lives and relationships all around him Gatsby never veers from pursuing success defined as material abundance and from seeking salvation achieved through personal effort and cunning.

But today's story tells us of Nicodemus, who was on a Gatsby-like path, then listens to a voice that nudges him to visit a man who tells him he must be born again.

It's a message worth taking to heart in any age but especially now in our very confused, very conflicted nation. Amen.