



LENTEN SERMON SERIES

Decision or Commitment?

John 3:1-9 and 15-17

Pastor Robyn Hogue

March 5, 2017

Skyline Presbyterian Church

Nicodemus is a good man. He is an intelligent, sensitive, strong leader in his community, and an active participant in weekly worship. He may be wealthy but he doesn't show it off. He is certainly not poor.

Nicodemus, this good man, encounters Jesus and his whole life is thrown into turmoil. He is unable to deny that he senses the presence of God in Jesus, even though it contradicts much that his religion has taught him. Nicodemus has made a decision about Jesus. He begins his conversation with Jesus by making it clear that he has decided that Jesus really is from God. He has come to a point of belief about Jesus, but it is not the same as committing to become a follower. And we all know that some things take more effort to deny than they do to admit.

Nicodemus can't deny what he senses but neither does he have the courage to raise his questions in public. There is this fault line, which stretches between what Nicodemus professes in the daylight among friends and what he wonders about alone at night. Nicodemus lives along that fault line. And just like Nicodemus, our deepest questions about authentic faith, meaning and purpose, life and death often remain unspoken and, as long as they do, like Nicodemus, we remain profoundly unsatisfied.

As all people who live along fault lines know very well, fault lines can also give way to earthquakes. And our buddy Nicodemus, this good man, shakes because the scripture he has known since childhood is coming alive in strange and dangerous ways. He cannot deny what he feels in the presence of Jesus, so he follows his question to the source.

Perhaps safely under the cover of darkness, Nicodemus can assume he can keep the conversation with Jesus on his own terms, like an anonymous post on Jesus' Kingdom of God blog. Perhaps Nicodemus is hoping he can go home with his questions answered and his life undisturbed. Then he can go on with his normal religious life.

But Nicodemus finds that his questions lead to a most vulnerable place. New life at an old age? Uncontrollable winds that roar through your soul and fill your life with Holy Spirit? What's Jesus saying here? What's going on? Why the riddles? What have You done with my religion?

Jesus speaks of a new birth from the Spirit, and we, with Nicodemus, are induced into labor. Anyone who has given birth or witnessed a birth knows that neither the labor nor the birthing is without pain. Nicodemus discovers quickly that he can't control his encounter with God or even the course of his own life. "What on earth are you talking about?" he asks Jesus in desperation.

Jesus' language doesn't make sense, so Nicodemus resorts to literalism, that last bastion for all who would keep God at arm's length. How can I reenter the womb? he asks. Literalism is a way to keep things safely on the page or in the head, but certainly not in the heart. Ah, but Jesus is not interested in a safe religious conversation, not then and not now. Then and now, Jesus is interested in the changing of lives—your life and mine.

The Nicodemus who lives within us trembles because we know that to believe seriously in Jesus is to yield everything, to lose our religion and to be born again. This is risky business. How can this be? Nicodemus cries out in holy labor. Indeed, how?

Jesus speaks and we who would be born listen. Jesus says that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. The fault line cracks right down the center; grace shatters the fetters of safe religion. Jesus says the most radical thing of all: "If you believe in Me you will emerge from the womb of the Spirit wet with the newness of life. A whole new person you'll be." And we cry out: How can this be? It appears what is required is the willingness to believe that the God of scripture may also be present in life, to have the willingness to believe that divine love revealed itself in Jesus. Nicodemus stands there in the night and feels the wind of commitment blowing across this face.

Do you suppose this is all that is required for us to be born anew? Not once, but again and again? Is this all that's required: to come timidly at night or to come boldly in the day to ask of God, how can this be? How can it be that we who are nursing secret hurts and fears, nagging insecurities and embarrassing private sins can ever change? How can we be anything else?

This is the heart of the matter, isn't it? Believing that we can be born anew is but a short distance from believing in the One whose love is capable of saving us. Salvation is what the ancients called this life-long process of being made whole in God. It's different from making a decision to believe. We tend to define belief as the acceptance of something as real or true. But biblical belief is more than just an intellectual acceptance or a heartfelt acknowledgement; it is a commitment to follow. Following by definition requires more than mental assent, it calls for movement.

If you read through the four Gospels, you'll find that Jesus says "Believe in Me" about five times. But care to guess how many times Jesus says "Follow Me"? About twenty times. I'm not saying that following is more important than believing. What I am saying is that the two are firmly connected. One can't live without the other. If you try to separate the message of follow from the message of believe, discipleship dies in the process. Belief and movement is what Jesus invites Nicodemus to accept.

This visit in the night to speak with Jesus is not the last time we read of Nicodemus. The next time we meet up with him is in John 7. The popularity of Jesus has grown immensely. The religious leaders are overcome with jealousy and fear. We read that the Sanhedrin meet together to find a reason to silence Jesus. Part of their role as the religious leaders was to judge false prophets. They needed to come up with some kind of accusation or charge that would indict Jesus as a false teacher. Nicodemus is sitting among his peers as they conspire to bring Jesus down. Nicodemus believes Jesus is from God, but will he say anything? Will his belief translate into commitment? I imagine him sitting there hoping someone else will say something in defense of Jesus. Surely he's not the only one who believes. What will it cost him if he goes public with his conviction? Then we read in verse 51 that Nicodemus comes to Jesus' defense: "Does the law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"

Though Nicodemus stops short of saying what he believes, he risks his career and reputation by speaking up on behalf of Jesus. This is no longer a private conversation about what he believes. Nicodemus allows what he believes to interfere with his work, his relationships, and his financial future. In this moment, he stops being just a fan and begins the journey of following. When he does so, the rest of the Sanhedrin attempts to embarrass Nicodemus for associating with Jesus when they ask "Are you from Galilee, too?" (verse 52)

It was meant to be a hard shot to Nicodemus' ego and a threat to his religious reputation that he had worked so hard to establish. It was a reality check for Nicodemus. Any hope he had that he could follow Jesus without it interfering with his life has been shot down with that one question, Are you from Galilee, too?

At the end of John's gospel, there is one other brief reference to Nicodemus. In chapter 19 Jesus has been crucified and his body is being prepared for burial. And then we read that Nicodemus brought "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 75 pounds." This would have been an extremely expensive and costly gesture. And make no mistake; this gesture cost him more than just money. There is no longer any chance of hiding his affection while most had abandoned Jesus or were hiding in fear. Things have moved past words of belief expressed in the darkness of night. Nicodemus is no longer a secret admirer. He isn't just an enthusiastic admirer. It seems he had become a follower. This is the last time we read of Nicodemus in scripture. Christian tradition asserts he was martyred sometime in the first century.

Let me get more personal. When you move from being a fan to committing to become a follower love shatters you and leaves your safe religion in pieces. Don't bother trying to put it back together. It will no longer hold. And I can tell you that once you commit to become a follower of Jesus you will never again be satisfied by anything less.