

Sunday March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Lent II

**PRAYER:** O Holy God, Judge of the world, you are also the guardian of the world's children. So you sent your Child into the world you love, not to condemn it, but to save it. Come among us this day, judging us and protecting us, convicting us and comforting us, that we might grow in faith and do your bidding. Amen.

**CALL TO CONFESSION:** If we place our trust in human strength alone, we find ourselves in a position of weakness. Let us confess our failure to affirm God's strength in our lives. (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)

**PRAYER OF CONFESSION:** God of all power, you are the source of every gift, all strength and power. We confess that our image of strength is not the Christ, who disappointed all who sought a mighty Saviour. Rather, our symbol of strength is Samson, who lunged through life by sheer brute force and strong will, with a dauntless courage and superhuman strength that intimidated enemy and friend alike. As we seek to shape our lives in an insecure world, the image of Samson's strength suggests that physical strength can make our lives secure. But there is no ultimate security in sheer strength alone. Teach us, O God, that strength manifest in your Son, our Lord; the gentle strength that comes to fullness in weakness, the power that exists in trusting your Spirit. Amen. (Judges 16)

**ASSURANCE OF PARDON:** God gives power to the faint and increases the strength of those who have no might. Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall rise up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. God knows our weakness and replenishes us to love and serve. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Amen. (Isaiah 40:29, 31)

**STEWARDSHIP:** Divided loyalty is an unacceptable character trait among God's people, and nowhere is the level of our divided hearts made more evident than when God's light of conviction shines on our attitude toward money. Jesus said in Luke 16:13, "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." As a declaration of who is our heart's true master, we now offer in the spirit of generosity our tithes and offerings.

**BENEDICTION:** Go now from this church and these friends to the places God will show you. God will make you a great people; God will guide you and make your name great for the sake of Christ, and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Amen.

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John 3:1-17  
“Born Again”

There is a story about an old Native American chief who was famous for predicting what the weather was going to do. A group of people would go to the chief and ask him, “What will the weather be like tomorrow?” The chief would reply, “Much rain. Very wet.” Sure enough, the next day it would rain and be very wet. Others from the tribe would go to the chief and ask, “What will the weather be like tomorrow?”

“Much snow. Very cold,” he would reply. Sure enough, it snowed, and it was very cold. Things changed for that tribe however, when one day the people came to the chief and asked, “Chief, what will the weather do tomorrow?” The chief replied for the first time ever, “I dunno.” The people became alarmed that their beloved chief had lost his ability to predict the weather, as they depended upon his forecasts.

Finally, someone asked the chief, “Are you okay? Are you sick?” “I am fine,” the chief said. “Then why can you not tell us what the weather will be tomorrow?” they asked. “I can’t help you” the chief replied, “because my radio is broken.” Experts; we sure seem to have a lot of them in this world. For every subject and every situation, there seems to be some expert, or consultant, who shows up to tell us what it means and what we should do.

We don’t always agree with the experts, and they don’t agree with each other, but one thing I noticed is that we always listen to them. For ill or for gain; people are ready, willing, and able, to follow the local guru who says the right thing in the right way. How many times have you had a debate with someone, only to have them quote some radio or television personality as proof that their opinion is the correct one?

Take the American presidential race for example. Why, does it matter to anyone what some television or movie star says about a particular candidate? Does the mere fact you have your face on television somehow make you a more discerning individual or politically astute observer? Experts; we love them and we despise them. We cherish their wisdom, and dismiss them as foolish. But one thing is true of all experts; they are not perfect, and sometimes they get things horribly wrong.

Such is the case in John chapter 3 where Jesus has an encounter with a local expert. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and a prestigious religious leader of some note. For most of his life Nicodemus had all the advantages. He studied the Law of Moses, and the collective application of that law. He knew every nuance, every interpretation, and every appropriate punishment for any violation. Most of Nicodemus’ life had been spent in debate with other religious leaders over minute twists and turns in how the law might apply to issues that regular people faced.

Issues like, if a chicken laid an egg on the Sabbath, was it lawful to eat that egg since work was involved in laying it. The answer to that world shattering debate was that you could eat the egg, but you had to kill the chicken for violating the Sabbath.

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It sounds a bit silly, but men like Nicodemus took their work very seriously. They firmly believed that their work saved good people, like themselves, from violating the law and invoking God's wrath.

Nicodemus had a problem though. Suddenly, there appeared this man named Jesus and his world got turned upside down. Jesus confused Nicodemus, and others, because it was clear that God was with Jesus; after all he was able to do such miraculous things. On the other hand, Jesus seemed to have such disdain for any long practiced religious traditions. Jesus would do things no good Pharisee would do, like: touch sick people, touch dead bodies, heal on the Sabbath, and eat with tax collectors and other sinners.

Yet, what most confused Nicodemus and his colleagues, was Jesus' total lack of desire to court approval from the religious leaders. Jesus went about doing his thing, not caring one iota for what the Pharisees thought about him. Jesus even went so far as to call them nasty names like "brood of vipers". Why would Jesus not want to get their religious stamp of approval? After all they were the religious experts. Actually, what was really going through their minds was, "How can we control Jesus?"

What Nicodemus was struggling to understand, was that Jesus was taking his followers down a different path than had been traditionally followed by God's people. A completely new way of seeing faith was being introduced by Jesus and it was causing Nicodemus to lose some sleep. What Nicodemus wanted, was for Jesus' approach to somehow be woven into his existing religious framework.

He wanted, to borrow a phrase from Jesus, to place "new wine in old wine skins". Jesus knew where Nicodemus was coming from, and that is when Jesus uses one of his most famous phrases, "You must be born again". In other words, you must set aside everything that gave your religious thinking structure and start over. By the way, Nicodemus knew exactly what Jesus was saying.

Nicodemus' question, "How can a man go back into his mother's womb"; was not asked out of ignorance, but as a way of trying to disarm Jesus' approach. This discussion in John 3 is a classic demonstration of how debates in Nicodemus' circle of colleagues would be carried out. It is a classical form of rabbinical teaching. You take a subject, and you pass it back and forth examining every angle.

The crux of the argument being made by Jesus comes when he says to Nicodemus, "Just as you can hear the wind, but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit." Nicodemus replies, "What do you mean?" Jesus replied, "You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you do not understand these things."

Jesus is not being insulting, but stating the truth. Nicodemus who has had the luxury of years of religious instruction, study, debate, and interpretation of God's word; could not fit Jesus into his carefully crafted religion.

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All that religion Nicodemus carried, actually got in the way of faith. It isn't that Nicodemus' efforts were worthless, but that these tenets of religion had made any movement of the Holy Spirit in his life difficult. Larry Osborne points out something very interesting that is related to this passage in John, in his very good book, *A Contrarians Guide to Knowing God*.

Osborne points out that it was no accident that Jesus was raised in a backwater town and used simple illustrations to convey profound truth. It is no accident the New Testament was written in the simple language of the marketplace rather than classical Greek-which was far more eloquent, but way beyond the grasp of the common man. It was all part of God's plan to make the inaccessible accessible.

*When Jesus burst onto the stage, he confronted a religious system that saw God as anything but accessible. Spirituality was reserved for the elite-those with pedigree, education, and a commitment to rigid self-discipline. He countered this with a different path, one that farmers, fishermen, carpenters, even little children and sinners could follow." (pg15)*

Osborne is right on, especially as we contemplate the situation Nicodemus faced. His religion got in his way of being in relationship with God. It is no wonder: those tax-collectors, prostitutes, children, lepers, the blind, lame, and countless other marginalized people flocked to Jesus. Life was hard enough when you are struggling to survive, but it is brutal when no one, not even your religious leaders, are offering any hope.

So along came Jesus; eating with sinners, taking time to place children on his knee and Nicodemus just didn't get it. It may seem harsh, but in some ways the religious elite liked having people living in misery. It's true. Think about it for a moment. If when I look at the people in my city or village, and I discover that I have a: good home, good health, good relationships, education, and many religious resources.

Then I examine my neighbours who are sick, poor, homeless, doing illegal activities to earn a few dollars: I might conclude that I am better than these others, and that somehow I must be doing something right for God to bless me. I might be inclined to have the attitude of the Pharisee in Jesus' little parable in Luke 18. There we read the following passage...

*Then Jesus told this story to some who had great self-confidence and scorned everyone else: Two men went to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a dishonest tax collector. The proud Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: "I thank you, God that I am not a sinner like everyone else, especially like that tax collector over there! For I never cheat, I don't sin, I don't commit adultery, I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.*

*But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed.*

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*Instead he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, "O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner." I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For the proud will be humbled, but the humble will be honoured. (Vv. 9-14)*

The real issue for Nicodemus was that he believed, or at least wanted to believe that God played favourites, and more to the point, that God saw him as one of his favourites. Then when Jesus started blessing others deemed unworthy in the Pharisee's eyes, Nicodemus wasn't so sure of his own special status. Nicodemus fell into a trap that we all can fall into.

The religion or religious practice we so lovingly promote and defend, can become an end in itself. The truth is that God wants a great relationship with all of us regardless of our education, our connections, and our ability to be "religious". I think that one of the reasons Nicodemus came to Jesus was that despite all the advantages he had religiously, he still didn't know God.

He knew an awful lot about God, but he didn't know him. It shocked him to his core that someone like Zacchaeus, a notorious sinner, could somehow capture the joy and relationship with God in Christ, while he languished in debates about chickens and eggs. As ridiculous as that sounds, it was the truth, and Nicodemus was hurting at a spiritual level. The Holy Spirit was convicting him of his religion's shortfalls.

Nicodemus was missing the key ingredient to life, a relationship with his creator. I am sure you know, Christians are very fond of claiming Christianity is not a religion, that it's a personal relationship with Jesus. It sounds great; has a nice ring to it. In fact, it is often a phrase used when people witness to others. It was a phrase used to silence and convert those who questioned the uniqueness of Jesus and Christianity.

The problem is that like Nicodemus, we have no idea what it means. We still equate religion with relationship, but they have nothing in common with each other. Religion places a major emphasis on rules and rituals that are designed to manipulate God to elicit his favour. The mark of religion is easy to spot. It is a one size fits all spirituality: "Follow our rules, fulfill our rituals, and God (or gods as the case may be) will be pleased or placated."

Relationships are different. They are fluid. No one recipe can guarantee a great relationship. What works for one person, will not be effective for another. In a relationship, you do not know from where the wind blows or where it is going. Relationships offer adventure, surprise, shared struggles and joy. Relationships transcend all other aspects of faith.

Do you remember when Jesus said that the Kingdom of God belongs to little children? If that is true, then why do we insist that people have iron clad doctrine before we consider them true children of God? I don't know if you have ever sat in a Sunday school class with children, but they often have some pretty messed up theology. They haven't a clue about substitutionary atonement or the trinity.

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But Jesus said the Kingdom of God belongs to them. It is also true that quite often I run into godly people who feel so ungodly. In most cases, people feel this way not because they are far from God, but because they haven't been able to live up to generally accepted measures of spirituality. They feel they just don't fit the mold of what "spiritual" people look like.

However, the truth is, that just because you don't know all the minute details of Leviticus, or can't bring yourself to journal your thoughts every day, or feel inadequate in any type of prayer attempt, doesn't make you any less loved by God. In other words, just because you don't have your life together, doesn't mean you are not one of God's beloved children.

Just because you feel you don't measure up to the Nicodemuses of this world doesn't mean Christ loves you any less. In fact, you may be surprised to learn that in your struggle to relate to God in Christ, you might actually be further along in your spiritual pilgrimage than the so called religious experts. That was certainly the case with the parable in Luke 18 about the Pharisee and the tax collector.

If you are hoping that the spiritual hunger in your heart can be eased by more religious practice, like reading more, praying more, or giving more; then you've misunderstood what Jesus was all about. Faith is not about what we do as Christians. Instead faith is all about who we are as believers, and who we have a relationship with. You will notice that the only time Jesus told anyone that they had to be born again; he was not speaking to someone unknowledgeable about God.

He was speaking to someone well versed in religious things. The evangelism Jesus was doing was to someone who considered themselves already inside God's kingdom. Maybe the church needs to also be born again; to become more about water and Spirit than rigid practices of faith. Because if we continue to believe that we can find God by doing the right thing and not by knowing the Saviour, we will continue to dance in the dark.