

Sermon at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT
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He was a traditional church Warden if there ever was one – a person of distinction and probity, a pillar of the religious community, respected by all and prosperous as well. His name was Nicodemus, and one night he set out to find Jesus and engage him in conversation. In that interchange, Nicodemus got far more than he had bargained for.

“Rabbi,” Nicodemus began, “we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these things that you do unless God is with him.” Now here is the voice of confidence, the voice of one with power and tradition on his side. “We know” are the words that flow naturally from Nicodemus’s mouth, as he, a leader of the Jews, begins a chat with the new rabbi. And what do Nicodemus and those he leads “know?” Well, they are sure that they have Jesus all figured out. They know the source of Jesus’s power. They know how God acts in the world, what can and cannot happen. They know the limits of things, what is possible and impossible. They also know the immutable facts about human beings: that people are born, grow old, they die. They have God and life all figured out, the theological boxes filled in. Nicodemus and his ilk know much or at least they think they do.

“No you don’t,” says Jesus. “No one can really know what is possible with God unless one is born from above, born anew, born of the Spirit.” Thus with his opening response to Nicodemus, Jesus moves outside the boxes, the familiar categories and theological assumptions of Nicodemus’ established, orthodox universe. And poor old Nicodemus is left stammering in disbelief, “How can these things be?”

Now Nicodemus is actually not so very different from us. We have a human tendency to shrink our religion down to a manageable size, to fit it into the small boxes of our inherited presuppositions and limited imaginations. We boil the richness of our faith down to slogans like “What would Jesus do?” and reduce the mystery that is God to something that fits on a bumper sticker, “Honk if you love Jesus.” We think we know much when we actually know little. We suppose we know the way things are, the limits of what can and cannot be.

To us, as to Nicodemus, Jesus comes and says, “Think again. The wind of God’s Spirit blows where it chooses and it is beyond your knowing. If you want to be my followers, you must be willing to have your categories redefined, you must be willing to be blown by the Spirit into places you never would have dreamed of going.”

Over the centuries, God’s Spirit has led to many, many changes in Christian belief, in what we have thought to be right and in what we have thought to be wrong. There was a time when we Christians “knew” that the earth was flat, that heretics and witches should be put to death, that crusades against infidels were holy, that human slavery was ordained by God, and that kings rule by divine right. Those who once believed such ancient truths would be greatly startled to discover how much Christian thinking on these matters has changed.

God's Spirit has led to some surprising changes in my own religious thinking. Take, for example, my understanding of the famous verse from today's Gospel, John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." I remember the time when this verse pinpointed the crucial importance of being a believer. You see, in the particular Christian culture in which I grew up, the world was divided into two great camps – the "born again" and the "unsaved." The born again were those who believed in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. The unsaved were those who did not so believe and thus were perishing. As I have grown older, I have come to a different perspective on John 3:16, a perspective in which the emphasis is not on our believing or disbelieving, but on God's "so loving." From this perspective of God's abundant love, the world is not divided into the saved and unsaved but all of us are enfolded in God's saving embrace. What matters is not so much who's a believer and who is an unbeliever, but whether the Spirit of the God whose love is so generous and enduring is living in us.

I blush to say that when I was ordained fifty years ago, I opposed the ordination of women. However, if, as St. Paul says, "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female", why limit ordained ministry by gender? How much our church has been enriched by having our full humanity, male and female, represented at the altar. What a welcome change from the church as it used to be – when only boys could be acolytes, only men served on the vestry, and girls and women polished the silver and cared for linens in the sacristy. But if you had described the changes then in the offing to the Bill Eakins of 1969, he would have been astonished as he exclaimed, like Nicodemus, "How can these things be?"

There was also a time when I questioned blessing same-sex unions and ordaining people who are gay. We used to "know" that such things were "wrong." But over the years, I along with many Christians, have come to see that diversity of sexual orientation is one of God's gifts and blessings to us. Why wouldn't God want all people in loving relationships to "love and cherish" each other "until [they] are parted by death?" And why wouldn't God want people of different orientations to serve throughout the church? I believe that the challenges to what we once thought we "knew" about gender and sexuality are the unfolding work of God's Spirit.

Jesus wasn't trying to get Nicodemus to replace his little theological boxes with slightly larger ones; Jesus was trying to get Nicodemus and us to do something far more profound – to surrender the "we know" attitude of presumptuous thinking and let ourselves be born anew.

There is a place, of course, for doctrine and for discipline, for thinking seriously about what we believe and the consequences of such belief for how we live. There is a time for saying "we know." But our affirmations of faith always have to be tempered by a large dose of humility, by the realization that our knowledge is partial and imperfect and that God is always bigger than our theology.

Lent, the season of remembering that we are but dust, is an especially good time for us to be humble and admit that there is a great deal about life that we do not know. We are constantly

confronted with questions for which we do not have clear answers. What should I say to my estranged child? What should I do about that problem at work? How should we respond to global warming, the corona virus scare? Whom should we elect as our political leaders? We can and should have opinions about all these matters, but the truth is that alone we do not have the definitive answers to such questions. That is why we need to be open to what God may be trying to tell us and open to each other. That is why we need to pray and read Scripture together. That is why we need to be talking to each other and listening to ideas and opinions that are different from ours. And what better place to be doing these things than in the church?

So what of Nicodemus? We are not told in so many words what he made of his surprising conversation with Jesus that night. We do not hear much of him again until the end of Jesus' life. Jesus has been crucified, his body taken down from the cross, and there is Nicodemus now coming to prepare Jesus's body for burial. This time Nicodemus comes onto the scene not as a questioner but as a disciple, not as a religious authority, but as a humble worshipper. Now he does not say, "We know." In fact he says nothing; he simply comes, bearing a precious gift: a mixture of aloes and myrrh, a sweet-smelling ointment whose perfume fills the air and is carried by the wind that blows where it wills.