

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury
Sermon – February 20, 2005
“Beyond Literalism”

Genesis 12:1-4a

John 3:1-17

Second Sunday in Lent

Rev. Richard C. Allen

Nicodemus is one of those Biblical characters you have to love! He is smart enough to know he doesn't have all the answers. He is like a professor who chooses to always be a student. He identifies individuals who have something to teach him and he pursues those people. Nicodemus knows a lot. He would make a lot of money on TV shows like Jeopardy. But there are certain questions that remain a mystery to him. He may project a persona of one who has all the answers, but deep down he carries unanswered questions regarding spiritual things, things that pertain to life and death, things that have to do with God.

Nicodemus is one of those Biblical characters you have to love. Like so many of us, he is a left-brained, logical, reasoning sort of person. He likes it when things fall into neat categories. He likes it when you can put all the data into a mathematical formula, turn the crank, and a clear answer pops out on the other side of the equation. He's the kind of guy who would love our expression, 'do the math.' He loves it when everything adds up. He sees things in black and white. Gray areas trouble him. I remember my delight when Mr. Sal Mangiafico first wrote an equation on the blackboard and proceeded to demonstrate how to solve the equation for X. It was so perfect! So neat! So clear! It was the day I fell in love with math!

Nicodemus is one of those Biblical characters you have to love. Nicodemus identifies Jesus as one of those individuals who can teach him something. He is cautious in his approach. He seeks Jesus out under cover of darkness. He doesn't want the whole world knowing what he's up to. But he has this nagging question. It's a question that has hounded him for a very long time. Nicodemus knows he is alive. He can measure his own pulse rate and conclude that, yes, he is alive. He can look in the mirror and wink at himself and know that, yes, he is alive. He can test himself in various ways and know that, yes, he is alive; but he senses there is more to being alive than one can measure with a stethoscope or with a blood pressure sleeve or with a mercury thermometer. He knows it but he can't quite put his finger on it. His education is lacking in this one area. He wants to be alive in ways he knows he is not, and he doesn't have a clue about how to get there!

I think you have to love this guy! He identifies Jesus as somebody who might have an answer for this nagging question whose answer has eluded him thus far. Jesus receives this late night seeker into the room where he is staying. And he hears the question Nicodemus brings. And he has an answer for Nicodemus.

“No one can be truly alive unless one is born from above, unless one is born of the spirit.” Nicodemus takes this answer in, ponders it for a few seconds, is clearly perplexed, and replies out of his literalist orientation,

“How can anyone be born after growing old?
Can one enter a second time into his mother’s womb?”

Now is where the fun begins. How will Jesus draw a left-brained scholar into a right-brained dimension? What will Nicodemus have to let go of in order to discover that deeper life he so desperately seeks?

For all of its security, literalism has its limitations. For all of its appeal, literalism has its short-comings. To approach the divine mysteries of God with a literalist orientation is like looking at a cake with one hundred burning candles and seeing only that it is a cake with candles.

To look at the cake in this way is to miss the one hundred years of life and of loving and of aching and of grieving and of reconciling and of rejoicing. Beyond the cake and the candles, there is a person with a soul.

This is what Jesus desires for Nicodemus; that this late night seeker would begin to see what his naked eye can not see, to touch what his fingertips can never touch, to taste what his taste buds can never taste, to smell what his nostrils will never sniff. Jesus wants Nicodemus to move beyond the literal to the metaphorical, beyond the word that is on the page to the Word that is inscribed upon the heart, beyond the logical to the illogical, beyond the concrete to the metaphysical, beyond his mother’s womb to the womb of amazing grace, beyond where he has ever been before to that place of the soul, that place where angels dance and where the wind is really God’s own breath.

If Jesus is going to communicate with Nicodemus, he is going to have to move to a different kind of classroom. The classroom with chalkboards and bookshelves and inkwells will not suffice. Jesus takes Nicodemus by the hand and walks him outside into an open space. They stand there until the wind comes up. They feel the wind on their faces. They feel the power of the wind. They cannot see the wind, but they can feel its strength. They have no idea where the wind comes from, but they cannot deny

its force. Jesus invites Nicodemus to stand in the mystery of the wind. The wind shall be the new classroom.

If Nicodemus is going to be alive in a way he has never been alive before, he will need to know the wind is more than the consequence of a change in barometric pressure; he will need to know the wind is the breath of God. The wind is God's own Spirit. To know this and to trust this is to be born from above. To know this and to trust this is to tap into that deep current of life that is sometimes described as 'eternal life.'

We have in our clothing catalogues a curious garment known as a windbreaker. I guess one would wear a windbreaker to protect oneself from the power of the wind. It must have some quality that deflects the wind such that the wearer doesn't experience the force of the wind. What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is this: leave your windbreaker in the closet! Stand facing the wind. Let the power of God enfold you and move you and shake you and bless you. Let the power of God inspire you and forgive you and change you. Let the full power of God get a hold of you and transform you. Leave the windbreaker in the closet.

I'm not sure that Nicodemus gets it all on the first visit. I suspect he has to return to this new classroom many times. He has a literal orientation to life that serves him well in certain settings. But his literalism becomes a handicap when it comes to things spiritual. What does it mean for any of us here to be born from above? My invitation is to enter that new classroom, we'll call it the Nicodemus Room, to stand in the wind, to expose ourselves to the power of God's Spirit to transform our hearts. This is the way to being truly alive. This is the way to that deep current of life we think of as 'eternal life.'

You have to love this Nicodemus character. He is you. He is me. He longs for something more. He seeks out Jesus for an answer. But the answer is not what he expects. The answer will come when he removes the windbreaker and exposes himself to the power of God's redeeming love. The rest is up to him. The rest is up to us. In the greatest of hope, Amen!