

Sermon for 2020 Yr A Lent 2
Preached Sunday 3/8/2020 at St. James', Mount Vernon
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The gospel story of Nicodemus is often treated like a cartoon, Nicodemus a caricature of the Pharisees who just can't understand Jesus. Nicodemus appears to be dumbfounded when Jesus tells him, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." He responds with literal nonsense, "How is it possible to be born again, like a new born baby?" It's easy to laugh at poor Nicodemus, to treat him as a parody of the Pharisaic bad guys in our story. What a buffoon!

Well, this morning I want to assure you that Nicodemus is not an fool. Rather he is very much like you and me—and far from flummoxing Nicodemus with cryptic sayings, Jesus addresses him with love and compassion, and speaks words to bring him into the fullness of life, into the life that Jesus proclaims.

I think that Nicodemus speaks for many of us, who come to Jesus with some guardedness, uneasy with the perceived demands of faith, uncertain about how the following Jesus may impact the lives we live now. The promise of new life, of life abundant, of eternal life; the hope that the Kingdom of Heaven is near, and that we can be part of it, and a part of its coming: these hopes draw us towards Jesus. But we also resist living wholly into the life of faith. What will our families, our neighbors, and our colleagues think? Will we become one of those crazy people, carrying signs around outside of the White House? What about our comfortable lives, the comforts and security that we've attained—will we have to feel guilty about them, too?

Nicodemus comes to Jesus acknowledging him as a man of God, but Jesus tells him that there is more, that he must receive and begin a new life from God if he is to receive what Jesus is teaching. And to me, Nicodemus' response is far from foolish. Instead, it is tired and world-weary, even despairing. "O Jesus, How can anyone be born after having grown old? Tell me how this is possible. How can an old dog like me learn new tricks?"

How can Nicodemus, established and recognized as a leader of the community, recognized as a man of wisdom and authority, turn over a new leaf, and leave everything behind to follow Jesus? How can he give up the friends, the respect, the identity, the familiar and comfortable ways, all those habits that have shaped and defined his life, in order to put his faith and trust in Jesus?

I'm sure that you know what I mean when I say, You can't teach an old dog new tricks. We put lots of energy into learning how to get by in this world, what works for us and what doesn't, what we're willing to tolerate and compromise with, and what we aren't. And when we've got it figured out for ourselves, we're not very much inclined to change our ways. Because change is hard.

How do any of us old dogs learn a new trick? I looked it up on Google—and Google's literal response returned hundreds of pages and YouTube videos on how to

teach new tricks to old dogs. Apparently, there is plenty of evidence that our canine friends can learn at all ages.

I think that the problem of learning a new trick is not so much how, as why? What can motivate us to change? Certainly, realizing that the old way of doing things doesn't work anymore may be a motivator. But there are so many people stuck in unhealthy patterns and relationships, who can't or don't or won't see any alternative. Just because there may be a better way doesn't mean that someone is going to change... something has to make them see that the change is worth the cost.

What Jesus gives to Nicodemus, and to us, is the motivation to change. And that motivation is love. Love is the force that leads people to try something different, to do something new, in order to be closer and more connected, in order to support and build up the loved one.

And Jesus loves Nicodemus, and gives his love to Nicodemus. He teaches Nicodemus that he has the freedom to change and grow—everyone who is born of the Spirit is free as the wind blows, connected to the invisible presence of God.

He teaches Nicodemus that God loves him, in some of the most famous words in the New Testament, John 3:16: "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." But even more importantly, John 3:17: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Jesus is there, not to set Nicodemus up for failure, but to show him the way to new life.

Perhaps we can now imagine how Nicodemus, fortified and encouraged by God's love made known to him through Jesus, may have let himself struggle with Jesus' teachings—and we can struggle with this teaching along with him. What would it mean for us to be born again? What if we could be born again, if what we thought was impossible could be so? If you were to be born again, what would you do differently? How might your life turn out different?

And here's the main thing—how would your life be different, if you truly believed that God loves you with total, sacrificial love?

Imagine your life, your past and your future, through the eyes of the One who loves you. Jesus offers us the possibility that our lives might actually BE different, lives filled with grace, lives filled with God.

God himself has learned a new trick, hasn't he? By making himself known through the person of Jesus Christ, and by redeeming us all in Love on the Cross. And so he has given us his example, to learn a new trick, to let our old self die on the Cross, and to be born afresh into new life through Jesus.

Amen.