

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

"Counting 101" – Trinity Sunday

It's what always seems to happen when you ask Jesus a question! You are seeking some clarity, some added understanding to what you already know, and Jesus responds to something other than what you ask. His answer isn't necessarily bad, but it doesn't answer your particular question.

Nicodemus is a pilgrim. He comes to Jesus with a serious statement and devout faith in hand. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." No one is quite sure who the "we" is in his statement. Possibly other priests or Pharisees who are not as bold as Nicodemus. Nicodemus believes that the presence of God is at work in Jesus—but if he believes that, what will it lead to? Nicodemus, a man of faith in God, cannot do the things he sees Jesus doing. Something is going on between God and Jesus that is different. Jesus replies that to see the kingdom of God, to know God's presence within oneself, one has to be born from above. How can one be born again protests a confused Nicodemus? We are too big to enter back in our mother's wombs!

Jesus responds that those who believe in God are to be born in a totally different way; by water and Spirit. The wind blows where it chooses he says—and you never know where it comes from or goes. "How can these things be?" Nicodemus asks. The presence of God is supposed to be definable! Everyone knew God resided in the Holy of Holies in the temple. Yet, Nicodemus believes God is also present with Jesus.

We know all too well how Nicodemus feels about the notion of God on the loose at work in us in mysterious ways. It is unnerving. Nicodemus has taken all the basic life courses that we have, like "Counting 101". Like you and me, he probably started his training for this course on his mother, father or other caretaker's lap. One, two, three. Remember, on page one of the big book there was one orange. On page two, two bananas. On page three, lo and behold, three apples! When mom pointed to one dog on

the street and we gleefully said “Three doggies” she replied, “No honey, that is ONE dog.” And she held up one finger. When there were three pieces of candy and we guessed two, we were told, “Let’s count them together.” “One, two, three...pieces of candy!” We were rewarded with one for a good job, for adhering to the reality in front of us. In Counting 101, logic and rationalism are encouraged.

But Jesus’ testimony discounted all such logic! It always hinged on something else. Nicodemus, like any good monotheist, had questions about Jesus’ claim of God being spread all over the place—including indwelling in humanity! One minister writes, “Jesus invites Nicodemus into a new realm of insight...he pushes him far beyond his comfort zone.... Like most of us, Nicodemus the Seeker is limited by the familiar ‘word world,’ the world he knows best. He responds in his best left-brain, legal-scholar, word-parsing mode. He sees tricks, deadends and practical impossibilities. It is all he knows how to see. Yet Jesus persists from his right-brain, heart vocabulary, with fertile images of wind, spirit and expansive love.”ⁱ

God, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, calls Nicodemus to a faith that will force him to forget how to count sometimes! To put away logic and order so his eyes can see the new thing that God is doing in Jesus. Jesus teaches Nicodemus it is sometimes necessary to put aside all that a Pharisee, schooled in the law of God, would have learned from Counting 101 through his graduate degree! He tells Nicodemus, I am not simply a teacher from God, but the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, God, who will ascend again! Then he leaves behind all rational speech by offering Nicodemus salvation and eternal life, stating that God has chosen to save the world through him. He even claims that just as the Spirit is present in him, Nicodemus can know God’s presence always.

But to know and see God’s presence Nicodemus would have to be born of water and Spirit. He would have to receive the love of an uncontainable God who comes and goes as the wind blows.

Nicodemus faces the same wonder Isaiah recounted in his vision and call. “Holy, Holy, Holy...” Only the Holy One now stood before him, dwelling in humanity. With the possibility of being born of the Spirit Jesus offers Nicodemus a life unlimited by the frailties of the flesh. The kingdom of God alive here and now in Nicodemus?

It is too much for a faith based on Counting 101 and its ensuing logic to take in. Believing in God as blessed Trinity is a promise of continual transformation! The Word of God frolics all over the pages we’ve been given as the New Testament as Jesus throws logic to the wind and makes sweeping claims of God’s love for an undeserving world, now revealed in him and the promise of the Spirit with us.

Jesus calls Nicodemus to place his trust in him, his words and God’s promise. Preacher Will Willamon comments, “Insight occurs (for us), not from burning the proverbial midnight oil, not from buckling down and working hard to get it, but as gift, from above. Grace. ...As modern folk we are under the delusion that we possess, already within us, sufficiency to grasp the world, to understand, to know. All knowledge is readily available to all if everyone will just think hard. Jesus speaks of knowing what he’s about as birth, breeze, boon. ‘How can this be?’ Oh, Nicodemus, even for a well educated, self-assured, confident intellect like you, the wind blows where it will. Even for you, there is possibility not of answers, but of enlightenment, light.”ⁱⁱ

What happened to Nicodemus after his conversation with Jesus? Did he receive Jesus' call to a new way of belief in the God he already knew or did he simply walk away, unchanged? It is lucky for us, the author of John's Gospel reports a bit more of his story. A little further into the gospel, the chief priests and Pharisees have sent the temple police to arrest Jesus. Nicodemus decides to question the other Pharisees and the chief priests saying, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" Although he is on to the notion that you must hear first to determine truth, the council asks him if he is from Galilee, Jesus' birthplace—meaning are you with him or us? He is silent in response. Nicodemus' question lingers as does the question of what he believes. At the end of John's Gospel Nicodemus emerges again. This time in silence. He goes with Joseph of Arimathea to recover Jesus' body from the cross. "Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, ...came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews." They laid him in the tomb in the garden and went to keep the Sabbath.

Henry David Thoreau once said, "It takes two to speak the truth...one to speak and another to hear."

Nicodemus, the seeker who came to Jesus full of questions, heard and received the truth of Jesus' teachings and was transformed by the wind that blows where it chooses.

Being born of the Spirit means being regenerated, sanctified or continually renewed, given new life throughout our life. God, blessed Trinity, is here even now, ready to transform our lives as we give up our notions of God that are limited to Counting 101 and open ourselves to belief which entails trust beyond what we can understand. God desires all who have questions to ask and seek as Nicodemus did. What we find may shock us as we wonder together over the wideness of God's mercy to us and gawk at God's non-conforming answers to our questions!

What we learned in Counting 101 and our best and brightest logic since then cannot contain or regulate the gift of God's love and grace! Instead we are invited to receive all that our Triune God has done for us as an unmerited gift. All praise be to God for this good news! Amen.

i "Late-Night Seminar," Patricia Farris, *The Christian Century*, 2002.
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_3_119/ai_83143841

ii "How Can This Be?" Dean William Willimon
<http://www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=60>