

Series: The Words of Jesus—Private Instructions**Today: Nicodemus: Curious, Confession, and Confirmation**

A Communion Meditation preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

John 3:16 seems to show up in so many public places these days that this wonderful explanation of the Gospel has become cheapened in its expression. It is hard for us to remember that it was spoken to just one man in a very intimate conversation, and there is more to the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus than just verse 16. However, John 3:16 is all you will see this afternoon as it is waved on placards in the end zone at playoff games or in the spring when it will pop up in the bleachers of baseball games. You will see it at rallies and other public gatherings, and those who know it will recognize it immediately: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”*

This morning, as we return to our yearlong series on the words of Jesus, it is where we begin our examination of the private instructions which Jesus gave to individuals or small groups of his disciples. Because the words are spoken at the end of a longer conversation with Nicodemus, I would like to look at the words of Jesus from the perspective of Nicodemus himself: his curiosity; his confession; and his confirmation.

His Curiosity

Nicodemus is one of those mysterious biblical figures about whom we have only snippets of information. We have this encounter in Jerusalem. Later, in John, we hear of Nicodemus defending Jesus before the Sanhedrin (John 7:50-52). Finally, following the death of Jesus it is Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who claimed the body of

Jesus for his burial (John 19:39-42). Other than these three stories, all in the Gospel of John, we know little about him.

Here is what we can surmise from these three stories. We know he was a religious man; that he was a Pharisee and a member of the elite leaders of Judaism, the Sanhedrin. He must have also been a man of considerable wealth for it was he who purchased the most expensive herbs and lotions to treat his body for burial. In short, he was a man who appeared to have everything going for him. He was a man of means; a man of power and authority; a man of great position; but there was something that caused him to seek the counsel of Jesus at night; a time when he could avoid being seen. Wm. Barclay says of Nicodemus, "*Nicodemus was a puzzled man with many honors and yet something was lacking in his life. He came to Jesus for a talk so that somehow, in the cover of darkness, he might find light.*"

What I find it fascinating is that we have surrendered this passage to those in the church who feel that unless you have a dramatic conversion experience, you have not been saved. In the passage there is a classic method of inquiry; questions which were met with answers and followed up by other questions. Nicodemus wanted to know what it meant to live as a person of faith in the secular world. He was curious. He did not allow his reputation or his credentials to keep him from asking the important questions of faith: *How can this be?* Where did we ever get the idea that to have questions as we travel the road of faith was to somehow be less than faithful? Questions are natural when we are dealing with things we don't fully understand, and asking our questions can be a way of deepening our faith if this is our goal. If our questions are simply to show others how bright we are, it is unlikely they will be of much use to us or anyone else.

I am reminded of the words of dedication in Speer Library on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary: “*Within these walls the light of learning may illumine the life of piety in the service of Jesus Christ, the Truth.*”

The curiosity of Nicodemus invites us to be more curious about our own faith; to bring our questions to Jesus and trust that in dialogue with him we will find what we need to take the next step in the journey of faith.

His Confession

The confession of Nicodemus also invites us to share what we know of Jesus. Some of us here today may find that we are ready to acknowledge Jesus as someone special, but we may find it difficult to go the next step and confess him as our Lord. Use the model of Nicodemus. Confess what you know. “*Rabbi, we know you are a teacher sent from God...*” If that is the best that you can do, start there and ask God to help you take the next step of faith. Nicodemus started with what he had, and because he shared what he had, God blessed him with more.

Pastor Phillip Johnson tells of his first call to ministry after his ordination in the United Church of Canada. He had received a call to serve one large church and ten smaller churches on the northern coast of Newfoundland, Canada. On the first day of his new circuit ministry, Johnson learned that in order to get to the smallest of the churches, he would have to travel 40 miles by snowmobile to a tiny village. When Johnson arrived, only one person had shown up for worship—a fisherman who had traveled about 20 miles to get there.

Johnson initially thought about just saying a prayer and calling it a day. But then he realized that together, he and the fisherman had already logged 60 miles of travel and

had 60 more miles to return home. With that in mind, Johnson decided to conduct the whole service as if there were a few hundred worshipers. They did it all: the hymns, the readings, the prayers, the sermon, the Lord's Supper, and the benediction.

It was during the sermon that Johnson wondered why he had bothered. The fisherman never looked up. But when Johnson greeted the fisherman at the door and thanked him for coming, Johnson received a pleasant surprise. The fisherman said, "Reverend, I've been thinking about becoming a Christian for about 30-odd years. And today's the day!"

Pastor Johnson shared what he knew with one man who had been waiting for years to hear what he had to say, and God blessed the encounter with a commitment of faith. Nicodemus reminds us that we don't have to be theologically astute. We simply share what we know and trust God with the rest.

His Confirmation

Finally, Nicodemus receives confirmation that Jesus is the One whom he has been seeking; that he is, indeed, the Messiah; the chosen one of God. He asks Jesus how he might receive what Jesus offers, and Jesus gives him the formula. *You must be born again.* In that answer Jesus reminds us that faith is more than thinking the right thoughts about God. It is also how we feel toward God. It is intellect empowered by affect. It is not only knowing what the Bible says, but it is also taking what the Bible says and allowing it to make a change in the way we live our lives. It is believing that God loves us in a very special way; loves us enough to sacrifice his only son so that we might have a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. It is allowing the knowledge of God's love in our lives to fundamentally change the way we think about things; to change the way

we see the world and our responsibility for it; to transform us from the inside out and help us to become agents of transformation in our society.

Anyone who watched the New York Giants defeat the New England Patriots in 2008's Super Bowl remembers the catch made by David Tyree, a receiver for the Giants. Eli Manning, quarterback for the Giants, threw what looked like a desperate pass. Tyree somehow jumped high above defensive coverage, picked the ball out of the air, pinned it to his helmet, and fell to the ground for a completion. The Giants went on to win the game, 17–14.

In the wake of his new fame, Tyree has talked openly about a troubled past. Tyree started drinking when he was in junior high. By his junior year in high school, he was regularly consuming 40 ounces of malt liquor and a half a pint of Jack Daniel's. It was not uncommon for him to smoke marijuana in the same sitting. The habits continued throughout his college career.

After Tyree was arrested for selling drugs to pay off a fine he had incurred during his rookie season with the Giants, his pregnant girlfriend threatened to leave him. "I had no peace," the player says. "My life was obviously in disarray." When he picked up a Bible and read its message of redemption, he knew things would turn around. He decided to never drink again and started attending church for the first time in a long time. Tyree is now sober, married, and a Super Bowl hero. Looking back on his life thus far, Tyree says, "It's more than just a feel-good story. It's about claiming destiny and purpose."

[Source: "Tyree's Big Comeback," *The Week* (3-29-08), p. 10]

Conclusion

Today we come to the table of our Lord. On this first Sunday of 2009 we remember that on the night he was arrested, he took the Passover bread and blessed and broke it, and he took the cup of redemption from the Passover and gave it a new meaning—the new covenant in his blood shed for the remission of sins.

There is a Nicodemus in all of us who come to this table. We have our questions that we want answered. We would like to tell God a thing or two about how the world should be run and how we would run it if we were God. However, God takes us right where we are, questions and all, and shares with us Himself so that we might find what it is we are looking for in him. Welcome to the table of the Lord!