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Jesus Meets a Theologian

John 3:1-21

Near the end of the Gospel of John, the author spells out his reason for writing. He says: *These [things] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name* (20:31). He's not lying; that really is his purpose. From the prologue to the epilogue, every conversation, every miracle, every encounter has something to do with faith. For instance, John is known for several unique accounts of individual encounters with Jesus, and it almost feels as if he means for the people in those encounters to represent different kinds of faith – or, sometimes, lack of faith. We're going to be thinking about faith for the next few weeks by looking at those encounters. Today, Jesus meets a theologian.

We read John chapter 3, verses 1-21:

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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.' ³Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' ⁴Nicodemus 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?' ⁵Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." ⁸The 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.' ⁹Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' ¹⁰Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹'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. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

It's easy to get lost when reading a dialogue in John, and this one is no exception. The confusion comes partly from the fact that Nicodemus himself is confused, and partly because Jesus can't seem to give anyone a straight answer in this gospel. So let's take some time to unlock this conversation.

It starts out well, with Nicodemus complimenting Jesus – “We know you're a teacher from God, because no one else could do the signs you do.” Clearly he's inclined to like this unusual rabbi. Things go downhill quickly after that, though. Nicodemus misunderstands the next thing Jesus says, “I tell you truly, if you want to see God, you must be born from above.” Now, Nicodemus's confusion is understandable. The Greek word that means “from above” – *anōthen* – can also mean “a second time.” Nicodemus takes it as having the second meaning and says, “How can I be born a second time at this age? I'm too big to get back in the womb!” So he misunderstands in two ways. First he takes the wrong meaning of the word *anōthen* – that's understandable. Then he thinks Jesus is talking about physical birth – that's a little more dense. So Jesus tries to explain that there's a difference between fleshly and spiritual birth. “I'm talking about the Spirit. That's why I said you must be born *from above*.” Nicodemus replies, “How can these things be?” which is 1st century rabbi for “Huh?” So Jesus goes on, trying to explain what spiritual birth from God involves: God loved the world so much that he sent his Son so that anyone who believes in him might have eternal life. (It's a great verse. You should think about memorizing it.) Jesus then adds that he knows that most will not believe in the light that he is bringing to the world, because most people prefer their own darkness. Nicodemus doesn't speak again.

What was Nicodemus's problem? Why did he struggle so much to understand what Jesus said? After all, as Jesus points out, “You're a teacher of Israel! Keep up!” But actually, I think him being a teacher may be the problem. Sometimes we teachers can get a little too comfortable with our own teachings, and the longer we teach the same things the more we fall in love with our own ideas. That's why academic disputes over tiny things can be so bitter: it's when one teacher's pet theory comes up against another's. People just get deeply invested in their own ideas and angrily defensive when those ideas are challenged. Jesus is challenging everything that the religious establishment of Jerusalem has been teaching. He says, the only way to know God is through a rebirth that comes not from this world but from above. All our earthly knowledge and practices and rituals and institutions and creeds are pointless without a birth from above. The teachings of this world (the flesh) are only good in this world. Look, Jesus says, the spirit of God is like the wind: you can see what it touches, you can hear it passing, but you can't explain it, can't direct it, can't catch it in a bottle to use later, can't control it at all. If you want to know God, you're going to have to go beyond all your comfortable traditions. To someone who's been teaching the established faith for years, and who has reached a high position because of that, this is . . . disturbing.

There may be another reason Nicodemus resists Jesus' words: it's the whole metaphor of birth. You see, in 1st century Judaism, the priesthood was hereditary. If Nicodemus was on the council, then he had been born to the Tribe of Levi, probably a direct descendent of the first high priest, Aaron. In other words, his position and authority were his *by birth*. I can imagine that Jesus' suggestion that earthly birth is irrelevant might have been unwelcome. This spiritual birth from above seems to be given to anybody, not just to people born with priestly privilege. People really hate being told that their time of privilege is coming to an end.

Anyway, I think Nicodemus doesn't understand Jesus out of self-defense, because what Jesus says challenges everything that made Nicodemus's life comfortable. He is drawn to Jesus, but can't take the next step, which would be faith. As one author puts it, "Nicodemus appears to be a man ready to believe but incapable of doing so. Jesus doesn't fit his categories" (Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 135).

So, if the characters of John represent different varieties of faith, Nicodemus demonstrates an *almost*-faith. He flirted with it, but wouldn't commit. It was just too different. If Jesus had said, "Your teaching is great! I'm so impressed! Let me just add one small detail!" I suspect Nicodemus would have accepted him. But Jesus didn't do that. He challenged everything, so Nicodemus backed off. He already had a theology that was working just fine for him, thank you. It's hard for theologians to hear things that break down accepted categories. At the pastor's conference I went to a couple of weeks ago – which, by the way, was quite good, so I apologize for my bad attitude going into it – I noticed something interesting. The speaker always had a time at the end of her presentations for questions, and a lot of people responded, but it took two days before one of the pastors there actually asked a question. Until then, everyone just made their own speeches. We pastors and theologians don't ask many questions, I realized. We like being the ones with the answers, and asking questions implies that we don't. I think that's Nicodemus's problem, as it would be mine: he couldn't bring himself to doubt his own answers.

But in that sense, we're all theologians. We may not all have degrees in the field, but theology is just thinking about God, and we all have ideas about God. Maybe we borrowed our ideas wholesale from our parents or childhood church; maybe we've cobbled together something different from books we've read; maybe we've just absorbed our ideas from popular culture and TV shows "God Friended Me." But wherever we got our ideas, we have them. What Nicodemus teaches us is that a first step to faith is to accept the proposition that God may be different from anything we've ever imagined, and that the way to encounter a God that is beyond our ideas is not to think up new ideas but is rather to open ourselves to the wind of the Spirit, who blows where she wants. Our inherited faith and ideas and assumptions aren't enough. The stuff we picked up on this earth isn't enough. We must be born from above.

A side note, but related. There's an important rule of thumb here for dealing with theologians and preachers and other opinionated Christians. If they seem to be unsure about their views, listen to them and take them seriously. That's what Jesus meant, I think, about the difference between flesh and spirit. God is qualitatively different from us. We are no more able to understand God than we are able to catch the wind. A theologian who speaks with the humility of uncertainty understands this. By contrast, if you hear someone who is 100% sure of his ideas, back off. That sort of absolute certainty just means that for some personal reason that person *needs* his ideas to be so. When someone is unshakably convinced by his own theological ideas, that always says way more about that person than it does about God.

One more lesson from Nicodemus. We must not only be open to the possibility that our ideas about God are wrong. We must also accept the possibility that faith in Jesus may cost us. Nicodemus was a man of power and influence, respected in Jerusalem (which may explain why he waited to visit Jesus until after dark). For him to accept Jesus' words fully might have meant giving all that up. Well, it *would* be hard, wouldn't it? I mean, would you do that? Would you continue following Jesus if it turned out that doing so meant you had to give up this beautiful

building with the sanctuary and the stained glass that you love and the choirs and the organ and the Fall Bazaar and all the rest of things that we enjoy about our institution? Faith requires humility, but it asks for more than that, too.

Well, Nicodemus doesn't say anything in John 3 after "Huh?" but he does appear later in the gospel. First, in chapter 7, when the priestly council is meeting to discuss the best ways to get rid of Jesus, Nicodemus raises a faint objection – "Are we following the right process? Shouldn't we let him speak?" – but the chief priest turns on him angrily and he shuts up. Then, in chapter 19, John tells us that after Jesus' death, Nicodemus joined Joseph of Arimathea in taking Jesus' body to the tomb and wrapping it in linen with spices. To the end, poor Nicodemus was drawn to Jesus, but stopped short of any response that might endanger his place or position or standing in the eyes of the council. And that isn't faith. Faith that risks nothing is a mild preference, nothing more. No, to see what faith looks like, we're going to have look beyond Nicodemus – next week.