

10 March 2024

Jesus and the Theologian

John 3:1-21

One of the unique stories of the Gospel of John was Jesus' encounter with a theologian. We read John chapter 3, verses 1-12.

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.

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.

17 '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. 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.'

Few things can be more damaging to a person's growing, learning, and maturing than becoming an expert. I don't mean the *process* of becoming an expert – there's loads of growth and learning there – but for some people, all that growth stops as soon as they feel that they've arrived. As soon as they begin to see themselves as experts, it's all downhill. They begin to compare themselves with other people and to look down on "amateurs." Worse, they get stuck at the level that they've achieved and spend the rest of their lives defending their old ideas instead of listening to new ones. There are some academics who never grow beyond their own dissertations. More people care less for learning than they do for being learned. Sadly, this is

especially true for experts in fields like philosophy or literature or theology – fields where you don’t have to prove your theories with equations or lab results. In the physical sciences, you have to be open to the possibility that your theories may be wrong, because somebody might come along and prove them wrong in the lab. Not so with, say, theology. Theologians can go their whole lives and never think they’re wrong. It’s like a superpower.

This may be one reason that Jesus got anywhere with the religious experts of his day – the scribes and the Pharisees. They already knew what was right, and they had the credentials to prove it, at least to themselves. They already knew how to interpret all the Hebrew scriptures, already knew the correct methodology for doing so, even had their own equivalent of an Ivy League school. Everyone who wanted to be anyone had get their degree from Jerusalem. (That’s why Saul of Tarsus was all the way down in Jerusalem, studying with Gamaliel. Sure he could have gotten his degree from the local synagogue, but Saul had higher ambitions than that. Heh-heh.) But Jesus, well, he was thoroughly disrespectful to the experts. For starters, he knew the Bible better than they did. Experts *hate* that. But worse than that, he didn’t seek them out. He didn’t study at their school, didn’t engage in their debates, didn’t pay any attention to them at all. He went around teaching common people, and his teaching methods did not follow approved pedagogy. Imagine a college literature professor who told her students, “Oh, bother all the critics and critical theories and schools of critical thought. Let’s just read books together.” That would be, you know, crazy. Right? Well, that’s what Jesus was like compared to the scribes.

But there are still some experts who don’t give up on learning, who hold on to their curiosity, who accept the possibility that they might change their views. Nicodemus was apparently one of those. He was at the top of the heap, a scribe with tenure in Jerusalem, but he was intrigued by this new teacher. Now scribes were going out to listen to Jesus all the time, but only so that they could disprove him, challenge him, discredit him. Nicodemus actually wanted to hear what Jesus had to say. So naturally he went to see Jesus privately, after dark, when none of his faculty colleagues could see him. If anyone saw him listening to unapproved ideas . . . well, he would never live that down.

So let’s look at their conversation. Nicodemus begins by saying, *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.* Some think this is just some formal opening flattery, but I don’t. Nicodemus remembers that theology is supposed to point toward God, something that not every theologian remembers, and he feels that someone who does the works of God might have something to say about God. Jesus replies, *I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.* Jesus cuts right to the chase. If Nicodemus wants to know more about God, he needs to do more than examine signs. Jesus says, “It’s not about signs or teachings. If you want to see God, you have to be born from above. To know God, you must experience God in this other kind of birth.”

Nicodemus is already getting uncomfortable. He’s a teacher, and Jesus seems to be discounting the importance of teaching. So he resorts to time-honored academic behavior: quibbling about details. *How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?* Let me explain this. There’s a Greek adverb – *ánōthen* – that can be translated either “from above” or “again,” depending on the context. Jesus said “You must be born *ánōthen*,” apparently meaning “from above,” looking at the larger context. But Nicodemus takes it as “born *again*” and quibbles about the physiological difficulties of being born a second time. Now Nick is back on his home turf as an academic, arguing at

cross-purposes over definitions. But Jesus doesn't play along. He says again, "To enter the kingdom of God, you have to be born both of water and of the Spirit. And furthermore, *the Spirit blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.*" In other words, this new experience happens on the Spirit's initiative, not yours. This is apparently as much "new" that Nicodemus can take. He says, *How can these things be?* If what Jesus is saying is correct, then all his years of study, all his great learning, bring him no closer to understanding God than anyone else. That's hard to take for someone used to being treated as an expert. We don't hear Nicodemus speak again.

But Jesus goes on. He says, "Look, man, this is easy stuff. You're a rabbi, a scribe. How is this too hard for you? Let me lay it out as simply as possible: For God loved the world so much that he sent his only-born Son, so that whoever trusts in him will not die, but will live beyond time. It's not about how much you know. It's about trust. To be born from above, trust."

Some of you may have recognized that Bible verse, John 3:16, but when you learned it, it was a little different. For instance, you probably learned it with the word "believe" (or "believeth") instead of "trust." So why did I say "trust" instead of "believe"? Because the English word "believe" has changed meaning over the past 500 years, and it's mostly the fault of us Protestants. We have started to use "believe" in the sense of "agree with a statement or idea." When we say "I believe in God" we mean "I accept the proposition that there is a deity." But in both biblical Hebrew and Greek the word that we translate "believe" means, "I'm willing to pledge my life on that" or "I'm going to confirm that that's true by my actions." Biblical "belief" involves more than just holding correct opinions. And, I'm sorry, but I don't think God gives a flip for our intellectual acceptance of the proposition that he exists. But God cares a great deal about how much we trust. That's the kind of belief Jesus goes on to describe to Nicodemus. Verse 21: *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.*

There's nothing wrong with becoming an expert. It can be helpful to others if it is used appropriately. But one of the peculiarities of Christianity among world religions is the fact that becoming an expert doesn't matter here. Our faith is equally accessible to all, regardless of how learned they are. Other religions have their elites – Brahmins, Shamans, Gurus, and so on – but the saints of the Christian church range from great thinkers like Augustine to teenage girls, like Thérèse of Lisieux or Catherine of Siena. Depth and maturity of Christian faith has no necessary connection to how much we know; it's all about how fully we trust. That's what Jesus tried to get through to Nicodemus, but it was too much for one day. The good news is that Nicodemus doesn't give up. He comes back later, not to argue or even to learn this time, but to trust. Which is an option that is open to all of us, theologian or not.