

# "Nighttime Conversations"

## Sermon on Sunday, March 8, 2020

Based on John 3

There is something about nighttime conversations that sets them apart from the interactions and talks we tend to have during the day, which are often task oriented. "Can you pick up some coffee beans on your way home?" "Have you put that doctor's appointment on your calendar?" (My wife's voice) "Did you do your homework?" (speaking to Peter) Tasks rule the day. But at night, it's different... at least it can be. You may remember a night chat that was especially meaningful for you; perhaps you let your guard down with a good friend, talking about stuff that mattered more than coffee beans. To tell you the truth, I haven't had one of those night timers in a while because I'm usually asleep by 9:30! Yet, even as a confessing morning person I recall a few times when the shadows of the night made talking just a bit easier. Nighttime conversations can bring out the voice of your soul, rather than your rational thinking self; somehow the setting of the sun and the rising of the moon help us connect with our inner selves. And yes, this is official advertising for our Basic session next Friday at the Heinze home, titled, "Learning to walk (and talk) in the dark."

What we just heard in John 3 was a classic night timer, a conversation held in the comfort of someone's home after sundown. Nicodemus was reaching out to Jesus. The Jewish leader with the Greek name wanted to learn more about the notorious rabbi who had made headlines with controversial teachings and mysterious faith healings. Many of Nicodemus's colleagues were skeptical. The religious establishment usually is. And sometimes that leads to unhealthy forms of prejudice. People get labeled as fundamentalists or liberals or something else. Nicodemus, give him credit, wanted to go beyond the stereotypes and make up his own mind about this man from Nazareth. He chose a way that still works today: Talk to him! Have a conversation! Ask questions! He reached out.

Nicodemus means "victory of the people." His Greek name indicates that he was probably from the school of Hillel. At Jesus' time there were two major schools of Pharisees. One was more conservative - the school of Shammai, and the other one was more liberal, the school of Hillel. Some things never change, how often have we said that? And it proves to be true here. Every religion, every time, every expression of faith seems to have a divide between people who find strength and comfort in the bedrock of conservatism, and people who are more interested in integrating and embracing the new. And by "divide" I don't mean that those people can't get along, but their natural preferences often lead to different theologies, opinions, and choices and practices. In every religion. In every time.

Hillel's school, to which Nicodemus almost certainly belonged, was founded a few years before Jesus was born, the newest kid on the block; it was like "reformed Lutheranism." It welcomed people with Greek backgrounds, people that their conservative brethren would have dubbed half-jokingly "Gentiles," - not real Jews. Hillel's school included many Pharisees with Greek names. One of them was Nicodemus. Perhaps he came from a mixed marriage with a Jewish mother and a Greek speaking father. Perhaps he was raised in the Diaspora, a Jewish community outside of Palestine in a mostly Greek speaking city like another Pharisee we know, Paul. No matter how we slice it, Nicodemus was different. And yet, he was now one of the leaders of Israel, as John lets us know. And because of his background he was very likely more sensitive to other people who were judged or labeled or didn't fit in easily. Like the carpenter, who was not your typical rabbi, coming from the backwater town of Nazareth. So Nicodemus, the non-pure breed, reached out to Jesus. "Who are you?" "What are you about?"

You'd think Jesus would invite him with open arms. But he didn't give him any points for coming out at night and making the effort. He didn't say, "Thank you, finally someone who cares!" He didn't acknowledge the pretty sweet opening line that Nicodemus uses to set the conversation on a positive track, "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 could have been buttered away right there. But he isn't. On top of that, the conversation suffers a bit from John's story telling. In John's gospel the people who converse with Jesus are not shown from their most brilliant side. They usually come across as a bit slow, not understanding what the teacher is talking about. John uses this dialogue technique in order to drive home certain teachings of Jesus, such as rebirth in this case. He most certainly did not get authorization from Nicodemus to portray him in this way. In today's world, Nicodemus would file a law suit for defamation!

No, in fact, Jesus challenges this sincere Pharisee, and with him he challenges all priests, pastors, rabbis, imams, religious leaders of every generation. He asks: "What do you really know about God and about salvation?" What our Lord says in this night time conversation to Nicodemus goes beyond almost anything he said elsewhere in the gospels. His night time mind probes deep into the heart of the soul, making clearer our need for spiritual renewal than anything he said during the day; including the Sermon on the Mount. He dares us to put all of our religious crutches, all of our creeds, all of our rituals, our entire religious tool box, into question by saying: **above all, you need to become new at the core of your being! "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."**

What that means is that there are no religious proxies to the kind of freedom that Jesus encourages every human being to seek and enjoy. Of course, as day time people, we tend to fall back on proxies. That's just human nature. We hold on to a certain set of teachings or beliefs, which are not bad, but can easily fool us into thinking that the teachings are "it," when they are nothing without the renewal of the heart and soul.

In our times, people have even taken this nighttime conversation and its radical bearings and turned it into another day time proxy. There are people who run around during the day trying to take these very words from John 3 and separating people into those who are born again and those who are not. They use the language but they don't get the true spirit of what Jesus is saying here about the human soul. There is nothing, not even the notion of "being born again," that can capture the spirit of God in a human being. Jesus says here that it's simply not possible - not in Lutheran teachings, not in Catholic sacraments, not in born again rituals, not in Buddhist meditations, not even in a holy book, although the book leads you to the source, and I'm not diminishing that.

But Jesus himself, the man who quotes the Bible by memory at age 12, said: "You can't capture the spirit of God in a box - it's like wind, it's free." What you can do is open up the sails of your soul and ride in the wind of God's spirit. I envy surfers. It looks so cool! I tried it once for two days and I can say this much: I'm not a natural. But basically Jesus encourages us to be spirit surfers, to ride in God's wind without ever claiming that you own it, because, you don't. The renewal of our hearts and souls will happen over and over again in the same way that a surfer feels born again with every great wave he or she rides.

When night falls, ask yourself again: do I live in the freedom of a child of God? Am I free to live, to love, to accept, to share, to give up, to forgive, to ride in the wind of God? Sometimes it's easier to answer these questions at night. **Amen.**

**P** <sup>1</sup>Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>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.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” <sup>4</sup>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?” <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup>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.” <sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup>“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. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>“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.

<sup>17</sup>“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.”