

February 20, 2005
First Parish Church
John 3:1-17
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Letting Go of What We Know

Sometimes what we know (in our heads) prevents us from knowing what's right in front of our faces. Last week I was going from the Parish House to the sanctuary with a couple of folk. As we left the Parish House we noticed a flock of birds in the hawthorn bushes outside the office. Someone commented that they looked like robins. I said I didn't think they could be because robins don't stay around for the winter. After we finished what we were doing in the sanctuary and came back to the office we asked Jane Connors what the birds were outside. "Oh, they're robins," she replied. And so they were.

The problem, sometimes, isn't so much what we don't know, as what we are sure we do know. If it looks like a robin and flies like a robin, chances are it's a robin. Great insights in observation, in scientific discovery and in spiritual growth often require, as the first step, placing into suspension the very things that we are sure we know. Maybe that is especially true when it comes to God.

Augustine, one of the early church leaders, said, "If you have understood, then this is not God. If you were able to understand, then you understood something else instead of God." The Mystery we call God cannot be comprehended.

Many of us have spent much of our lives becoming knowledgeable, being in the know, about something in particular – business management, art, music, theology, mathematics, carpentry, parenting, ecology, etc. And yet, have you noticed, as you get

older that where you used to know so much, now you often realize how little you know? I want to say right up front that anything I say this morning does not mean that I think we should give up a quest for understanding – for studying - for pondering the mysteries – for asking why. There is always a dialogue between our understanding of the world and our talking about and experiencing God.

The Bible presents a worldview based on the physics of Aristotle and Ptolemy. With the scientific revolution of the 17th century Newtonian physics became the norm – an understanding whose influence is still felt in theology. Barbara Brown Taylor observes: *Walk into many churches and you will hear God described as a being who behaves almost as predictably as Newton's universe. Say you believe in God and you will be saved. Sin against God and you will be condemned. In this clockwork universe, the spiritual quest is reduced to learning the rules in order to minimize personal loss (avoid hell) and maximize personal gain (achieve salvation).*

Interestingly enough the new world of quantum physics has led us back to spiritual language. In this scientific worldview, the universe is more one interwoven web of relationships where everything affects everything else. The writer of the letter to the Ephesians (4:4-6) put it like this:

There is one body and one Spirit...one lord, one faith, one baptism, one God...who is above all and through all and in all.

No matter what our intellectual understanding is, it reaches its limits. It comes up against the

Mystery that is not fully revealed. The mind is not God.

Which brings us to Nicodemus. When you ask young people about “Nick at Nite”, they’ll tell you it’s the shows that can be seen on Nicholodean, a cable channel, in the evening. If we asked the writer of the gospel of John, he would say that “Nick at Nite” is when Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. That means he was a pillar of the church. He was faithful in his responsibilities as a leader of the community. He gave generously of his time and his money. He always tried to do the right thing. He was a righteous man in the best sense of the word. And yet, sometimes, as the dark gathered around his home, he would sense shadows on his soul.

Somehow Jesus had caught his attention. You know, when you meet someone and you think, “I’d like to get to know them better.” I suspect that most people who met Jesus did not find it to be a non-event. They were either disturbed by the experience or deeply drawn to him; or most likely, a bit of both.

So, Nicodemus goes to Jesus at night. Maybe so others won’t notice. Maybe hoping that he will be able to talk to Jesus alone. Maybe because at night the activities of the day and the beliefs he holds dear can no longer distract him from the shadows on his soul.

Maybe Nicodemus has a couple of teenagers at home reminding him of how little he really knows. So when he gets to Jesus, he falls into the temptation of leading off with what he’s sure he knows. “*We know that you are a teacher sent from God.*” As is so often the case, Jesus is going to turn that *knowing* upside down and inside out.

He says to Nicodemus, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being *anōthen*. The New Revised Standard Version, which we just

heard, translates this Greek word, *anōthen*, as “born from above.” There is a footnote that says or “born anew.” What this doesn’t convey is that in the Greek the word actually means both of those things at the same time. It is a paradoxical word that baffles what we know. It means *reborn* and *from above* all at the same time. So Nicodemus isn’t just dense when he responds, “how can anyone be born again after having grown old?” With his comment about being *reborn from above*, Jesus has invited Nicodemus into a conversation about the mystery of the spiritual journey and Nicodemus takes him up on it.

As the conversation continues, Nicodemus is puzzling. He has less of a grip on what he knows and is drawn deeper and deeper into the mysterious ways of the spirit.

Maybe that’s exactly why the image of being re-born is so appropriate. In physical birth, the one who is being born loses grip of the safe, comfortable, secure, all encompassing world of the womb and is squeezed, squashed and pushed, (with a lung crushing power) toward a mystery that cannot be comprehended.

So when people speak lightly and cheerily of being “born again” you’ve got to wonder if maybe they had a c-section delivery. This passage has been used by some in the Christian community as a “test of faith” rather than a “testimony to faith”. They use it as a way to “know” if God’s spirit is with you. You have to give witness to a specific experience that you can claim as proving you are born again. It’s ironic isn’t it, because the passage itself challenges that kind of certainty? *The Spirit blows where it chooses.*

In response to the way this story has been used to abuse, I have often wanted to dismiss it. Yet, today I want to encourage us not to be quick to dismiss this image of being reborn from above. On the spiritual journey, there are numerous rebirths and conversions – some

subtle and some profound. Have there not been times in our lives or areas of our lives today where we need a breath of fresh air, a new spirit to enliven us for the journey? All that we know has led us to a dead-end and we don't know how – in fact, we can't – make it on our own.

I want to share with you the testimony of a man who found he couldn't make it on his own. I had an opportunity a few years ago to meet James B. Nelson, whom some of you may know through his work as a professor at United Seminary in Minneapolis. He and his wife retired to Tucson, Arizona. So we invited Jim to lead one of our Southwest Conference clergy retreats. He reflected with us on his work for a new book – a book about his experience of being a recovering alcoholic. The book just recently came out and I took the time to read it this week. It is called *THIRST: God and the Alcoholic Experience*.

With honesty, humor, and humility, Jim talks about the ways his deep thirst for God got sidelined, misdirected, seduced and perverted through his experience with alcohol.

Jim's reflections are focused on his own experience with an addiction to alcohol, but his existential struggles with perfectionism, control, selfishness, and attachment (as he lists them) resonant with the human experience for each of us.

Jim speaks of his being re-born through the working of the spirit, inpatient treatment, AA groups, and the support of his family and church. He didn't go it alone.

Jim is conversant with the psychology language of addiction, and yet draws us back again and again to life as a spiritual journey that thirsts for God. Prominent *psychiatrist, Gerald May, puts it this way, "After twenty years of listening to the yearnings of people's hearts, I am convinced that all humans have an inborn desire for God. Whether we are*

consciously religious or not, this desire is our deepest longing and our most precious treasure." ...But whatever shape it takes, May argues, it is a longing to love and to be loved, and a desire for the Source of love, God.
(*THIRST*, pg. 28)

The writer of the gospel of John put it this way – God so loved the world,
God so loves the world,
that the word became/becomes flesh
and dwells among us full of grace and truth,
not to condemn us but that we might
know the fullness of grace and love.

We never know the full impact of this encounter on Nicodemus, but we do know that after Jesus death, he and Joseph of Arimathea come to claim the body. According to their tradition it was not the proper thing to do but it was the loving thing to do.

We often struggle with the tension between the proper thing and the loving thing.

Jim Wallis in his new book, *God's Politics*, (pg. 35) tells of a story from his childhood church. It was a church that did not have a pastor, but had a group of elders that were the spiritual leaders of the community. His father was one of the group, which you won't be surprised to know was composed entirely of men.

A young couple in the church became pregnant. The elders had a meeting to discuss the situation. One suggested that they needed to bring the couple before the congregation and condemn their sin. Jim's father suggested that they probably already new things were not good. Another elder responded that they needed to make an example of this couple for the rest of the community. Jim's father suggested that the community was probably well aware of the problem. The elders kept up the discussion until Jim's father agreed that they would bring the couple before the congregation and point out their wrongdoing.

However, he continued and said that they would then bring everyone before the congregation and point out their sins as well. Needless to say, the mood changed and the elders began to discuss what they could do to support this young couple through this most difficult time in their lives.

Sometimes the spiritual journey is about letting go. Letting go of what we know about:

- the ways of the working of the world
- how to make it on our own.
- our indignation at others' transgressions
- the proper thing to do.

For God so loved the world
God so loves the world
God will so love the world
forever and ever.
Amen.