

**"Nicodemus, A Man in Search of More..."**

Rev. Dr. Richard M. Cromie

Bay Head Chapel  
Bay Head, New Jersey  
September 24, 2011

If you have a favorite chapter in the Bible: say I Corinthians 13 on love, or Genesis 1 on Creation or John 14 on reassurance or the peaceful Twenty-third Psalm about walking through the Valley, hang on to it; but if you don't, or want to add another one, look at the Third Chapter of the Gospel of John, part of which I have read in your hearing. For one thing it raises one of the key verses of theological power and possibility: John 3:3 reads "in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, you must be born again, or "born from above" which is an alternate translation. It has been a subject of controversy from the time Jesus said it to Nicodemus. We will touch on it again before we leave.

Then a few verses later, we have the beloved verse which Martin Luther said was the whole message of the Gospel in miniature. We could say it together, John 3:16, "God so loved the world He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but shall have everlasting life." Oh dear - either one is worthy of a whole life time of study, or about a thousand sermons each. I will spare you that exercise of course, but this morning I want to focus our attention on a simpler task: to look at how the Chapter opens and the story of a man named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

Verse One tells us that he was a Pharisee, a member of one of the prominent schools of thought who shared leadership in ecclesiastical matters. Often portrayed as bitter enemies of Jesus in the synoptic gospels; yet they were the keepers of theological tradition and the sitting experts on the Scriptures. More importantly, Nicodemus had been chosen to be a member of the privileged Sanhedrin, the ruling council of 70 men who ran the nation's politics and religion. The Romans occupied Israel by then, but Caesar and his underlings left most of the day by day jurisdiction to the Sanhedrin.

That's all John 3 says about Nicodemus but there is a more we can fill in from the Bible. For one thing his name attaches him to a distinguished and honored family which had been prominent in the land for over two centuries. He was not a Johnny-Come-Lately, no nouveau riche guy here. Nicodemus was tried and true blue blood patriot. His family had earned their high position with hard work and devoted attention to the traditions and the defense of its faith. Dating at least to the Hasmonean Period two centuries earlier, some even place the origin of the Pharisees as far back as Ezra in the Fifth Century. His forbears had waged war under Judas Maccabeus 150 years before, trying to keep Jerusalem pure and true to Jehovah. He was an outstanding uncompromising Patriot!

He was also intelligent and well educated. You had to be in order to become a Pharisee. It took thirty years of rigorous academic preparation to become a member. I have a set of Cromies Laws hanging in our den down in Charlotte, one of which says "Brains Beat Everything!" They do! It's like the man who told me some time ago: "Of all the things I miss, I miss my brain the most!"

You remember that St. Paul was also a Pharisee. We honor him as a man of faith, but before that he was a Phi Beta Kappa Valedictorian at the University of Tarsus. He did graduate study in Jerusalem under Gamaliel the Elder, the most honored Rabbi of all. Nicodemus and Paul had both been educated in the best schools of the land: like Duke or Harvard or Stanford or Yale or Davidson. Williams, which placed first in a recent poll, or Northwestern, Cal Tech, or your own Alma Mater: North Carolina, NC State, or Pitt (my school!) Nicodemus was smart.

And it appears also that Nicodemus was also rich. Not that it matters all that much. Sophie Tucker once said, "I have rich and I've been poor; rich is better." In one way that is obviously true; but I have found that when things begin to

matter, when life brings on its worst in matters of the soul and spirit, we all sit together in the same pew. Like in the recent aftermath of Hurricane Irene, the floods in Vermont did not care which you were. And on that awful day, ten years ago next Sunday, when the World Trade Center Buildings and the Pentagon were smashed and toppled by gasoline filled Airplanes, it didn't matter at all who you were or how much you had. Remember that man in the Bible who kept building bigger and bigger barns to store all of expanding possessions. Jesus said to him: "Thou Fool, what on earth do you think you are doing? This night your soul will be required of you and the things you have accumulated, whose will they be then?" (Luke 12:13-31)

With Nicodemus, If you follow the Gospel of John until it is all over and the body of Jesus is taken down from the cross, Chapter 19, verse 38 reads that when Joseph of Arimathea took the body over to a new tomb in the Garden, Nicodemus was right beside him, carrying a 100 pound mixture of myrrh and aloes to be used to anoint the body of Jesus. That is a lot of myrrh and aloes; something like \$20,000 worth in current American dollars! Nicodemus had more than ample goods and treasures. He had everything a man could want, on earth. And he was generous.

\*\*\*\*\*

And yet (Are you listening?) one windy evening as it was growing dark, he put on his fine Brioni suit, tied a \$200 Countess Mara tie in a perfect Windsor around the collar of a Del Siena handmade dress shirt. And shod with his shiny \$550 Allen Edmunds Cambridge wing tips, he tiptoed outside the city through the dust and the brush and the trickling muddy streams so he could meet with an itinerant evangelist whose accent identified him as a country hick and dressed in a cheap muslin cloak; all so that he could ask the roadside preacher some questions. It doesn't make sense.

To us Jesus is the Son of God our Savior, the long awaited Messiah, our Redeemer and Friend; but Nicodemus didn't have the tiniest inkling of all that, not yet. All he had heard were some rumors that this Nazarene seemed to teach as an ancient Rabbi with authority, and it was said that he could work miracles of healing. In retrospect it appears that it was a wise decision for later in John 7:50 there he is again defended Jesus in front of the Sanhedrin (He had courage too.)

(Are you with me?) The question I want you to focus on for the next little while is, "Why did he do it? Why did he go? Why would prompt a man who had everything to take the risk of looking foolish and being ridiculed and incurring the wrath of his fellow Pharisees? Why? We cannot know for sure; but I have been around Nicodemus for so long that I think I can guess at some of the answer. I hope you are thinking about it, as I offer you some of my possibilities. It looks like something was missing from his life and he didn't know what it was. I hope you are thinking about it. I dare to hope that you might see yourself in one of the possibilities; but here are a few of my speculations:

\*\*\*\*\*

1. First, maybe he was just curious. After all as a well educated defender of the faith, it could be that he was one of those inquisitive types who had to see for himself, ever reluctant to accept a new idea on the basis of what people are saying - the type that has to check it all out in person. Give Nicodemus some credit, the sixty-nine other members of the Sanhedrin were flatly opposed to Jesus. Close minded, they were offended because the Nazarene would not accept their tried and trusty venerable way of seeing things. They closed their eyes and ears and hearts. Nicodemus was open minded enough to go out and to evaluate it all for himself.

I have known a boatload of people like that through the years. Curiously, some say that I am a bit like that myself. I was an avid debater in high school and college, and I learned to argue both sides of a topic on the same day. My wife would testify to my solitary approach and attitude to new ideas. If she were being polite in public she would probably tell you that I am quick to question what I read or see, especially cautious when it comes to what I hear. But, if she decided to be totally honest in private, you would overhear her saying in a most testy tone of voice: "You can't tell him anything. He won't listen to anybody!" (Can you imagine, a loving pastor's wife of 52 years?)

But back to Nicodemus: perhaps he was a "from Missouri" kind of person who had to be see things for himself. He was an earnest seeker, one of those willing to listen to both sides, but the journey was more important than the destination. He was however, capable of change. Perhaps he was perennially restless. Some are meant to wander, Paul Tillich wrote, "on the boundary." If you keep reading John, you will see that his opening inquiry that evening to Jesus persuaded him to become a follower. In Chapter 7, for example, he defended the Lord before the hostile Sanhedrin council. Good for Nicodemus: he was stubborn but he was not dumb. Like Konrad Lorenz, the noted ethnologist, he was willing to give up a pet idea every morning before he came down to breakfast, but he wouldn't budge an inch when it came to what he deeply believed. Curiosity killed the cat, but it could be what sent Nicodemus out across the valley.

Or, to touch on a second reason why he crept out to see Jesus: maybe he was ill and worried over of some lingering illness and weakness in his body, mind or soul. Sickness can lead you into all sorts of weird question and conclusions. Forgive me for this personal word but it helps me to frame the topic. I have had

six surgeries in the past 18 months: one of them was cancer. You have been through it probably, with you or your family or friends; and it can wear you down. Careful, I am not saying that I have a problem with the Time and Providence of God and His Will for my life here and in eternity; and I don't think Nicodemus did either. But lying there alone in a hospital bed in the middle of the night your soul and psyche can conjure up the strangest sort of shadows on the wall. Illness can sprout a variety of weeds in your personal Garden of Eden.

I recall the Pastor I started with as his assistant, having come home from a long hospital stay, telling me: Quote: "Dick, never make a decision in the middle of the night, wait 'til morning." Young or old or in-between, it could have been that some illness sent him out to the newest evangelist. I had a friend whose son was ill. He told me that he did not care what it cost or how close to bankruptcy he came, he intended to spend every dime he had to see whether he could heal his boy. Nicodemus might have worried about his future, and since Jesus was known for his healings, he wanted some reassurance that it would all turn out well.

Third, maybe Nicodemus was just growing older and wondered if he had missed out on something in his life. They asked Arnold Palmer once what he would do if he had it all to live over again. "Are you sure Arnie?" Quick as a flash he replied, "I would do it all the same way again. There is nothing I would want to change." "Are you sure?" "Well," Arnold chuckled, "I guess there were a few putts I would like to have over, but not the major things." I'd do it all the same again. You're lucky if you can say that.

I digress to speak with the younger people present here in worship. I welcome you especially. But be careful, you are at a point when you can look out on the world and ask, "What can I do to make the world a better place?" "How best can I help to bring about the changes needed to change the world for good?" Go to

it; there are a ton of things gone wrong. But I warn you; be about it, because before you know it, the tense of the question will change. Like the young mother said to me some years ago, "First I was born; then I got married; and the next thing I knew I was a den mother." Turn around twice; it seems just about that long since I was ordained 50 years ago. Then the question will be not "What can I do?" But "What have I done?" And the answer then, "Now" with me, will depend on the way you start out now. Whether you are courageous enough to tip toe out of the ordinary to see the Nazarene over to that small hick town called Nazareth.

The nihilism of our time and the plethora of changes in morals and human decency can make the heartiest of us depressed. Most of what believe and try to live by is what we were taught when we were young. A few go through some emotional moment of need and seem to reverse their course, but most of us finish the way we began. Sometimes I don't know what to believe about the progress we have made.

For example, I have always tried to be ecumenical and inclusive in my dealings with all of God's children. It was a strain at the beginning of my ministry, even my Father was bitterly opposed, but I worked hard in Protestant Catholic relations. Then as the years went by I spent quite a lot of time on Jewish Christian cooperation. I have always tried to be fair in race relations, too. I was serious in my attempt to follow Jesus. But now I'm told I should have learned Spanish, studied the Koran and have been more open to alternative life styles and sexual compatibilities.

It makes you wonder where we are going. My final prayer every night is that God will bless my family and our nation. Then I ask him to make me worthy of the love of Jesus Christ. Then I say, "Lord, please help me to understand what is going on, and for the remainder of my life, give me something worthwhile and meaningful to do! Amen." Maybe Nicodemus was wondering if his children and grandchildren would have faith and what he could do to help. Something was missing in his illustrious life, you can be sure of that. And he went to Jesus, looking for it.

Last, there is one additional possibility I should mention. Maybe it is the most important of all. It could be that he didn't know why he went. (Are you listening?) Maybe it was as simple as that God touched his heart, reached right down in the center of his being, and whispered in his ear that the something missing was right over there across the little stream to the west of town. Maybe it is as final as that God prompted him to go. John Wesley said that he was strangely warmed one night at a Moravian Church service in Aldersgate. He could never understand how it happened, but it did. He said God touched him; only God can change a heart.

Though years I can echo that for you. I have done some things for which I have no explanation at all. It just seemed right to do. I even changed churches, moved 1300 miles away because I thought I felt the power and peace of Christ nudging me along. "Why did I do that?" My wife Peggy, who I adore, told me later that I never even asked her if she wanted to go." (I doubt that for sure.) But, that Call took us to Florida for 25 years, first Fort Lauderdale then Palm Beach and the Royal Poinciana Chapel. It was there I met some wonderful people who introduced me to Howard Gray, then Lyons. And they invited me to come to Roaring Gap Church and I have been coming ever since. I hope you can

recall the humbling experience where you were led to make some important decision without knowing why and you now know it was the Will and Way of God who speaks when and where He chooses.

\*\*\*\*\*

Now before we go I want you to look at the first thing Nicodemus said to Jesus when he arrived. Like a good graduate of a Dale Carnegie course, he began with a compliment: "Rabbi," he said (a term of honor) we know that you are a prophet sent from God for no one could do the things you do unless God was with him."

But watch what happens next. Our Lord didn't even say "Thanks." No acknowledgement of the compliment (He never attended Dale's course.) Jesus cut right to the chase and said bluntly, "Come on Nicodemus, don't fool around with me. I know what you really want and need: you are here to find the one thing that is missing from your life. You have everything you need but the one thing you cannot live in peace without, how to overcome the emptiness and the struggles you have within yourself. What you need is simple, You Must Be Born Again. You must start all over with a basic commitment beyond you and what

you have. You have not surrendered to a higher power." Billy Graham once advised a seminar of young Pastors: "The hardest job you will ever have is to make a Christian out of someone who thinks he is."

John Wesley wrote that he felt like he was an arrow shot out over the water, "to fall I know not where or when. The only thing I want to know is how to get over to the other side. If there is an eternal heaven waiting for me and mine, I want to be sure that I can get there. How can I be sure I can find eternal life?" And I like to remind people that "eternal" is a long long time.

Jesus told us that is what we all want to know: how to live the abundant life while we are here on earth and how to spend the remainder of eternity in paradise with our Heavenly Father.

Well, it is time to go. Let's nail it down before we do, so not one person here will go away wondering what the preacher meant this morning. William Barclay, an old professor of mine in Scotland will lead the way. Dr. Barclay wrote that there are two great moments in a person's life. Just two. The first is the moment you are born. Otherwise there could be no conversation about you if you had never been born. That's first. The second is probably not the one you would guess. First is the moment you were born, the second is the moment you discover why." Are you listening? The moment you were born, and the moment you discover why. Until you find the why of who you are, the purpose for which you life was created and given to you, you can wander around aimlessly with no roots in the soil, picking up this pleasure and solving that problem, twiddling your thumbs and tapping your toes until you twiddling days are done!

Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be born again. He did not mean some wondrous emotional moment at a time of need which you can brag about all the day long, as some do and have done. There is a time for that, as St. Paul

experienced on the road to Damascus. But for the rest of us he meant a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ, deepening and broadening through the days and decades we are given. You must become like a little child to enter the kingdom of heaven: tiny, little, like a pinkie finger, important, to become a child of God.

Give me one little paragraph more: there is one final word before we go. As you do your daily rounds in the three score and ten years, plus or minus you are given, where do you see yourself in relationship to Nicodemus? Is he a friend of yours, a fellow seeker, "the journey," as we say, "is more important than the destination." Baloney. Not so, not at all. The journey is but the means we use

to get there, the place to travel, not the be all, end all. The goal is to be in the presence of Jesus the Christ and to bow down before him, with humility and grace and find the peace which passes all understanding from the one who gave us heaven to come to earth so that we could have the abundant life here and in all the time to come. I hope you have found your "Why" for now and forever more. Amen