

SERMON
"Knowing"
Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday
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January 16, 2011
St. John's Chapel UCC

Isaiah 6: 1-8

John 3: 1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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**." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

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? Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and **Spirit**. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

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

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.

Here ends the readings from holy scripture.

SERMON

A confirmation class once told me they really, really believe in the Trinity. When I pressed them to explain their belief about the Trinity, silence reigned. One of them finally said, “I like the way it sounds. I plan to name my daughter Trinity.” Apparently the word “trinity” holds a popular standing with our youth, because it sounds good. It’s trendy.

As it was following the Council of Nicene; it was the “in,” accepted explanation of the meaning of the Nicene faith. If you weren’t with it, you were a heretic; part of the out group. And so the triangle has made its way through the ages. Today most people do not know it is a human-made word not found in the Bible, but a doctrine crystallized in the 4th century to unite a fragmented church. The word Trinity is not present in the Bible, but Trinitarian language is present in the Greek Testament of the Bible, as it is today in our gospel reading. In Nicodemus’ story we encounter God, the Holy Spirit and the Son of Man—what we don’t encounter is some lengthy, boring expostulatory reasoning summed up in the doctrine of the Trinity. For instance, let me bore you;

“Christ is one and the same Son...complete in his deity and complete ... in his humanity, but he exists in two natures, which are at once unconfused and unaltered and has coequal status of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that are of one being in three distinctions of being.”

And on it goes! Clearly, our ancestors of old tried diligently to wrap their minds around the relationship between God, Christ and the Holy Spirit in order to know and understand all dimensions of God—while ultimately concluding that like God, the doctrine was a mystery around which we needed to wrap our arms.

Yes, our ancestors of old tried diligently to know all dimensions of God and tie God up in a nicely wrapped box. We are still working on this, but we cannot put God in box. To know

God requires more than intellectual knowing. Relational knowing is required—a knowing that comes not from an objective study of God, but from spending time with God. One fulfills the other. Study without relationship, to borrow a statement from Parker Palmer, “alienates more than it connects, the life goes out of things, and there is little left to sustain us.”¹ An attempt to know outside of relationship lulls us, puts us to sleep with, boredom, and leaves us wanting.

Church becomes the “same-old-same-old” Sunday after Sunday. You come on Sunday morning and you experience the same old routines and the same old prayers and the same old liturgies and the same old sermons said by the same old pastor, with the same old hymns, and you sit in the same old pew with the same old people who hold the same old bulletins. It is the “same-old-same-old,” Sunday after Sunday after Sunday.² Relational knowing excites and evolves. When we take God out of our boxes, God invites us to whirl in the stardust of miracles while our inner heart bursts with love.

When we first meet Nicodemus, we meet a man caught in the “same-old-same-old” routine--going through the motions of religion without the inner development, the **spiritual** development. of a relationship with God. How do we know this? We know this because of the way Nicodemus presents himself to Jesus and the way Jesus responds to him. Nicodemus opens the dialogue with Jesus saying, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher from God.” Jesus responds, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” It is as if Jesus is saying, “Nicodemus, I hear you saying that you know who I am, but **you can’t really know until you are born from above**, which can also be translated “born

¹ Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We are Known*, p. x .

² Edward F. Markquart, “Born Again,” *Sermons From Seattle*, p. 1.

again” or born anew.”³ This spiritual birth to which Jesus points is a **spiritual** development of a relationship with God.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, a member of the elite, wealthy, well-educated class came to Jesus knowing, knowing he had observed something unique and special about this man from Nazareth. Therefore, he seeks out Jesus and greets him with a compliment, a compliment that would make most of us blush with pride. For a Jew to call someone “Rabbi” was a statement of adoration, but to grant someone the title “Rabbi Shav el Elohim,” teacher from God, was the greatest compliment one Jew could bestow upon another.

Nicodemus is a symbol of a seeker, of a person wishing to know God and the ways of God. He is a seeker, a man with an inquiring mind, blocked by his rational, literal, boring approach to knowing.

Then Jesus of Nazareth shows up in his town. So quietly, one night, not wanting his fellow religious professors to know where he is going, Nicodemus goes over to where Jesus is staying. We can hear Nicodemus’ footsteps walking up the dirt path to Jesus’ tent. He sees Jesus sitting outside his tent. He walks up to him, and bestows upon him his adoration, his praise, his knowledge that Jesus comes from God. In return, Jesus bestows upon him the means by which he can also be a man who comes from the realm of God, the kingdom of God. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” But Nicodemus doesn’t get it, for he’s a literalist. “Born again? What, you want to push me back into my mother’s womb? Come on, now. I can’t be born again.”

He is a literalist, a deductive thinker, but one who’s also searching for what’s missing in his faith.

³ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 106.

So Jesus does not give up on him. He repeats the point. “You don’t understand Nicodemus. You don’t literally have to be born again. You need to develop a relationship with God. You need to get to know God with your heart as well as your mind.” Jesus’ actual explanation is lengthier, and at the end of it we are given no information on Nicodemus’ final response. We’re only told that Jesus, after his second explanation, left town.

Whether Nicodemus was born again or not the gospel doesn’t exactly explain, even when we jump forward to chapter 19 to find the end of Nicodemus’ story. There on Good Friday, after Jesus was crucified, two wealthy men came to prepare Jesus’ body for burial: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Nicodemus brought one hundred pounds of costly perfumes and spices with which to anoint Jesus’ body. With Joseph he puts Jesus body on a table, wrapped his body in a linen shroud, and tenderly places spices into the folds of the linen.

According to John, Nicodemus was there for this most sacred of ritual. Old Nicodemus was there attending the dead body of Jesus. He was there when they laid him in the tomb, for he had become a friend willing to be there for Jesus, even unto death. Born anew, I think so—for he is clearly at the end of the story, a man who has developed a relationship with the dearest soul that ever walked the face of the earth.

Ultimately, “being born again” is at the heart of what Christianity is about. It is what makes our faith rich and exciting. It is about setting aside time in our lives to deepen our relationship with God. It is about getting to know the trinity: God, Christ and the Holy Spirit on an intimate basis. It’s about listening to, as well as speaking to, “the three in ones” in prayer. It’s about sitting in silence to relish a moment of just being with God. If your religion’s getting boring to you, then soup it up a little; spend some time with the “trinity.”

The question came up in Sunday School. It was a good question. One that most harbor; one similar to Nicodemus' question. The question was: when we try to spend time with God and listen for God, how do you know when God's speaking, or when God is directing us? How do we discern? How do we tell our inner voice, from God's voice? How can we be sure it's God who is leading us? I've paraphrased the question, but I think I've captured the intent behind it. My answer was feeble, at best. Let me, in reference to Nicodemus' instructions, try again! When we sit in silence, how do we know we are sitting with God or our culturally shaped notion of God? How do we put ourselves in God's hands to be transformed; born anew?

One of the authors of *Companions in Christ*, the book we use in our Spiritual Development groups says, the way to move away from our culturally influenced God is through group meditation or prayer. "[Culture] beats, hammers, molds, and engraves us to such an extent that we may hear what culture says rather than what God says..." The more restricted our cultural experience (lived in Springfield all my life), the more limited our ability to hear God. The more diverse the group we pray and meditate with, the more likely they will broaden each other's outlook.

Group meditation can correct individual idiosyncrasies (id i o syn kre s) and allow us to hear God instead of ourselves. On this day, the Sunday before Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, we can honor Dr. King by acknowledging that his efforts to bridge our differences have given us a world that allows God to be heard more clearly; for the more diverse the group we pray with, the more likely we are to hear God—and the higher the likelihood of being born of the spirit.

Another idea I tried to express that Sunday in Sunday School was that of: by moving into a total void; nothingness, emptiness, or complete darkness; we find God. We can either add to our culturally influenced "knowns" to become more diverse in our understanding in order to

know God, and hence be born of the spirit. Or we can rid ourselves of preconceived notions; our nationalism, our selfishness, our gods, our prejudices, and even our beliefs; that divide us. Or as Krishnamurti puts it, in *Freedom from the Known*:

We are each one of us responsible for every war because of the aggressiveness of our own lives, because of our nationalism, our selfishness, our gods, our prejudices, our ideals, all of which divide us. And only when we realize, not intellectually but actually, as actually as we would recognize that we are hungry or in pain, that you and I are responsible for all this existing *chaos*, for all the misery throughout the entire world, because we have contributed to it in our daily lives, and are a part of this monstrous society with its wars, divisions, its ugliness, brutality and greed—only then will we act.

This does not mean you forget all you've even know or that intellectual knowledge is bad for us—for that simply is not so. I mean that when we sit with God, we put it all aside for awhile, we empty ourselves, so that it will not get in the way of being totally present to the entity that wishes to transform us past our best held intellectual knowledge and into a way of knowing that transcends our conventional ways of knowing. You see, God wants to stretch us so that we may never be the same again. Instead we will be new people, born of the Spirit. Amen.