

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, March 12, 2017 // Lent 2, Year A

The Gospel: John 3:1-17

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.

"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."

Background and general observations

This seemingly simple scenario has been the focus of much analysis and interpretation over the centuries. Why is Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night? Is Nicodemus speaking for himself alone, or is he an emissary from the Sanhedrin (the supreme council, or court, in Israel)? If Nicodemus is such a learned man, why does he fail to understand what Jesus is saying, taking everything Jesus says so literally? Does Jesus' speech prefigure the Last Supper, or are we reading back into it our own awareness of the Eucharist? And as always, what does this story mean for us and our faith journey? There is much more here than a first reading might sense.

Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, is drawn to Jesus, but many have conjectured that he comes to Jesus "by night" because he is afraid of others knowing that he is interested in this rabbi. Nicodemus seems to indicate that religious officials have found some merit in Jesus' teaching. "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God," Nicodemus says, "for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Yet, in the two verses that immediately precede this story, we read that many believed in Jesus "because they saw the signs that he was doing." (John 2:24) But Jesus "would not entrust himself to them." So, when Nicodemus asserts confidently that they "know" Jesus has come from God because of the signs, perhaps we are seeing up front that Nicodemus' approach and understanding are suspect.

Jesus makes it clear that his focus is not on signs or teachings but on a complete transformation that can be described as a rebirth "from above." "No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above," he says. The magnitude of this idea is difficult to understand (as difficult as the Trinity), and Nicodemus presses

Jesus to say more, by asking how this could be. But whereas Jesus had spoken about being born “from above,” Nicodemus asks how one can be born again, in the earthly sense, by “entering a second time into the mother’s womb.”

This precipitates Jesus’ discussion about being born “of the flesh” and being born “of the Spirit.” Of course, where you are born is where you are “from” and where you “belong.” And Jesus speaks of his own origins when he says that the Son of Man is the one who “descended from heaven.”

Throughout this dialogue, we have an interweaving of the divine persons of the Trinity: God, who gave God’s only Son; Jesus, the Son of Man who descended from heaven; and the Spirit, who is the giver of life. And by saying that we must be “born from above,” Jesus is inviting us into this divine, eternal life.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. John Calvin suggested that Nicodemus was a secret disciple of Jesus. This is the reason he comes at night. Calvin used this story to coin a word, “Nicodemites.” Nicodemites were the people in France who were evangelicals at heart but Roman Catholics in practice. They were people who could not bring themselves to show forth in their lives what they believed in their hearts.

In what ways might you be a Nicodemus-like character?

In the words of Parker Palmer, how is your “soul,” your truest self, sometimes at odds with your “role” in life? Is your nighttime truth sometimes at odds with your daytime practice?

2. “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.”

Martin Luther called this verse “the Gospel in miniature.” At certain sporting events, you might see fans displaying “John 3:16” on a poster board in the end zone. For many, it is an open profession of personal faith. Some have heard this verse quoted by people who interpret it to mean that one must believe what they believe in order to have eternal life. And sometimes, that doesn’t sound like good news at all. How do you hear this verse? What does it mean to you?

3. What might be signs that a person has been “born from above”? How does that person live or conduct herself in such a way that you know she has been “born from above”? How is that person different from other people? Have you ever had an experience that you would call being “born from above”?

In a staff discussion of this passage, Sarah Bartenstein commented, “I’d really like to know what tone of voice Jesus used when he was talking with Nicodemus.” Janet Allen noted that Henry Ossawa Tanner [painted a powerful image](#) called “Nicodemus and Jesus on a Rooftop.”

Ponder the image below—a study for Tanner’s painting—and wonder about how the scene unfolds. Where are they in the conversation? What is Nicodemus hearing? How do you imagine Jesus’ tone? Does this image help you to live into the account that the Gospel is offering?



4. If you could come to Jesus “by night” and ask him something, what would you ask? Take some time to imagine such a meeting. How do you feel as you approach Jesus? What do you ask? How does Jesus respond?
5. There is truth, and there is deepest truth. What is the difference? Perhaps you are in touch with an “inner voice,” but what about an inner-inner voice? Is there a secret room of the soul, perhaps rarely visited, that you consider to be your deepest truth? How do you access such an inner-inner place? How might visiting such a place (even for the first time) be connected to a Lenten experience this season?