

“Growth spurts”

John 3:1-17

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Our attention turns today to one of the most familiar stories in the Fourth Gospel. It has been the subject of countless sermons and Bible studies, and the topic of conversations inside and outside the church.

When Jimmy Carter announced in 1976 he was a “born again Christian,” it created quite a stir. For the first time in American politics, a biblical character by the name of Nicodemus found himself in the spotlight. Let’s bring him back to center stage this morning and shine the light on him once again.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, visited Jesus one night for the purpose of engaging him in a conversation. This was not unusual because rabbis often talked at night in the privacy of homes so they would not be distracted or interrupted.

I know much has been made of the fact that Nicodemus went to see Jesus at night, and some have wondered if he did so out of fear of being seen by his colleagues. While we can never know for sure what his motives were, I am not inclined to think this was the reason. In John’s gospel, Jesus is seen often with the Pharisees, and he openly dined with them on at least three occasions. John does not portray the Pharisees as adversaries of Jesus like the writers of the synoptic gospels. Instead, he treats them more sympathetically. It appears that Nicodemus came to Jesus after the day’s activities as an inquirer with an open mind to have an in-depth conversation about life and faith.

It did not take long for Jesus to wade into deep water. When Nicodemus greeted Jesus and paid him a high compliment, Jesus did not reciprocate. Instead, he told Nicodemus he could not see nor participate in the kingdom of God unless he was “born from above.” Nicodemus was terribly confused, thinking Jesus had said he must be born again from his mother’s womb and asked how this was possible.

“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.’ ” John 3:5-7.

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. “You are Israel’s teacher, and you do not understand these things?” Jesus replied. “I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things, and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?” John 3:9-12.

You know what intrigues me the most about this story? It is the way Jesus took advantage of this opportunity to engage Nicodemus in a meaningful conversation which could lead to a deeper understanding of life and faith.

Quite frankly, I am not sure Nicodemus thought this was possible. After all, he was one of Israel’s finest teachers.

He was a devout, Torah-observing Pharisee who had dedicated his life to obeying every rule and regulation of Judaism. By virtue of his Jewish heritage, he believed he was uniquely related to God and had a clear vision of the Kingdom of God. Because Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme governing body of Judaism, he certainly felt he played a key role in ushering in the Kingdom of God.

How was it possible that someone could know more about God, faith and life than Nicodemus? To him, this must have been inconceivable and outlandish. However, there was something about this itinerant, Galilean carpenter-turned-teacher which intrigued Nicodemus enough to visit Jesus that night, and Jesus did not waste this opportunity to challenge Nicodemus to take his faith to another level.

You need to know Jesus did not do this just for Nicodemus. He attempted to have substantive conversations with almost everyone he met. Jesus took advantage of encounters with friends and strangers to help them see the nature of God, and who they could become if they trusted God with all their heart.

Looking back upon my own ministry, I realize this has been important to me, too. Faith development and spiritual formation have been priorities in my ministry, as they have been for many of my colleagues. I find helping people to grow spiritually to be fulfilling and rewarding. I get excited when I sense growth spurts in my own life and the lives of those around me.

Why is it important that people of faith grow spiritually? The deeper our faith grows, the better we become. A clearer image of God and our potential to be like God will bring out

the best in us as we live out our faith among family members, friends and neighbors. It did for Jesus, and it will for us.

In addition, since God is much greater than we are and life at times overwhelms us, there is always more to learn. If Nicodemus, one of Israel's most respected scholars, needed to attend night school to explore the mysteries of life and faith, how much more do we?

How does a person grow spiritually? I think this was a question John hoped every individual would ask upon reading this story. With this in mind, let me share some suggestions for you to consider.

Make spiritual growth a priority in your life. Faith grows in the heart that yearns for God. Don't let the allure and pursuit of the things of this world crowd God out of your life. Seek to know God and develop a relationship with Him with the same passion you pursue anything of value.

Legend has it that a student approached Socrates and said, "Teach me; I want to learn." Socrates did not verbally reply but took him to the edge of a large body of water and walked in up to their chests.

Socrates then placed his hands over this potential student's head and pushed him under the water. He held him under the water until the young man thought he was going to drown. When Socrates released him, he burst out of the water gasping for air. "When you want to learn as badly as you wanted your next breath, come back, and I will teach you," Socrates told him.

Growth of any kind only occurs when we make it a priority. Put spiritual growth on the list, preferably at the top.

Adopt a humble attitude. Embrace a teachable spirit by acknowledging your limitations. Allow every person you encounter to become your teacher.

Listen to their story and perspective on life. Discover where God is at work in their life, and how each one reflects God's image. Let every encounter with another person broaden your understanding of who God is, and what God expects of you.

Develop a "holy curiosity." Become comfortable with questions. For most of us, faith begins with questions, and for all of us, faith grows as we wrestle with the complexities of life and faith. The dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus certainly indicates this.

When Jesus told Nicodemus that no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit, Nicodemus asked, "How can this be?"

Even Jesus was puzzled because of Nicodemus' lack of understanding and asked, "You are Israel's teacher and do not understand these things?"

There is no shortage of questions in this narrative, which I see as beneficial to faith development. The Christian faith has a leavening influence and is meant to disturb and disrupt. An authentic faith will lead to questions which result in a greater understanding of God, life and self. Ask Nicodemus.

A few years ago, one of my mentors taught me faithfulness has more to do with the questions we ask than the answers we memorize. He's right; questions will take you places answers will not, which will lead to new revelations. So, don't be afraid to ask questions and never interpret the lack of answers as a weak faith.

Don't be defensive. Be willing to examine and re-examine everything you believe. If it is true, it will endure this kind of scrutiny. If it is not, you need to know it now.

We cannot grow spiritually if our goal is to impress people with how much we know or to get in the last word to prove our point. Growth occurs when we suspend our understanding of truth and open our hearts and minds.

Nicodemus had to put down his defenses, which had to be hard for him to do as a Pharisee. If there was one thing Nicodemus knew for sure, it was that he had a clear vision of the Kingdom of God and was actively participating in it by virtue of his birth, gender, ethnicity, status and lifestyle.

Can you imagine how Nicodemus felt when Jesus opened their conversation by saying, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above?" Nicodemus had no idea that a relationship with God was open to anyone who approached God with a humble spirit and contrite heart. According to Jesus, God did not play favorites. God loved the whole world and everybody in it, including Nicodemus, his gentile neighbor and the woman at the city gates begging for bread.

I wonder what we believe that may be wrong. How would Jesus begin a conversation with you and me?

Do you think Nicodemus returned to see Jesus? I do, and I base this upon what Nicodemus did after Jesus died. Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus' body off the cross and prepare it for burial. I believe Nicodemus buried his dearest friend that day.

What steps do you need to take today to develop this kind of relationship with Jesus?