

“Growing Pains”

John 3:1-17

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most distinguished characters in the New Testament. His name was Nicodemus, a highly respected and influential teacher in Jerusalem during Jesus’ public ministry.

What set Nicodemus apart from his peers was his seat on the Sanhedrin, the supreme ruling Jewish Council. Only seventy of the over 6,000 Pharisees held that honor.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus devoted his life to observing every rule, regulation and ritual in Judaism. No one took his faith more seriously than Nicodemus. As a result, it appears he was loved, respected and trusted by many.

Our text begins by telling us this devout Jew visited Jesus one evening for the purpose of discussing religion. Evidently, Nicodemus saw something in Jesus that not only attracted him but compelled him to have an uninterrupted discussion with him about life and faith.

Much has been made about Nicodemus visiting Jesus at night. Some have wondered if Nicodemus chose to go under the cover of darkness 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 often seen with the Pharisees. He openly dined with them on at least three occasions and probably more.

John does not portray the Pharisees as adversaries of Jesus like the other gospel writers do. Instead, he treats them sympathetically. So, from John’s perspective, Nicodemus’ visit with Jesus that night should not be looked at as awkward or unusual.

Whatever Nicodemus’ reason was for visiting Jesus that evening, it did not take long for the conversation to turn deep and serious. When Nicodemus greeted Jesus and paid him a high compliment, Jesus did not reciprocate. Instead, he told Nicodemus he could not see or 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 seized this opportunity to help Nicodemus grow spiritually.

Jesus could have coddled and flattered Nicodemus like most of his friends probably did, but he refused to do this. Jesus was aware of how smart and good Nicodemus was, but Jesus also knew there was so much Nicodemus did not know about God, life, faith and relationships, and Jesus was not about to ignore this. He cared too much about Nicodemus to withhold the truth from him.

As a result, Jesus talked to Nicodemus about God's love for the whole world and everyone in it. He described a God who is accessible to all people and eagerly longs to have a personal relationship with every person.

Jesus stressed the importance of having a personal encounter with God, one based upon every individual's humility, needs and deep gratitude. He talked to Nicodemus about participating in the kingdom of God by living a life that reflected the heart and nature of this good and gracious God instead of following an endless set of rules and regulations.

Yes, Jesus could have coddled Nicodemus that evening and probably reduced some of the pressure he felt from the Pharisees for not being like them, but he refused to do it. He was not about to pass up this opportunity to engage Nicodemus in a meaningful conversation that could lead to a deeper understanding of life and faith. He was more concerned about Nicodemus' spiritual formation than his own popularity or welfare.

I believe Jesus wants to do the same for all of us. I think Jesus wants to open our eyes, hearts and mind just as he attempted to do with Nicodemus.

I believe Jesus wants to help us identify our blind spots and raise our sights. I think he wants to cast an alternative vision for living that is in stark contrast to the one the culture offers, one that values serving over being served, sacrifice over self-indulgence, truth over deception, justice over injustice, inclusion over exclusion, generosity over greed, humility over arrogance, love over hate, forgiveness over revenge, healing over hurting, peace over war and bridges of goodwill, understanding and reconciliation over walls of suspicion and hate.

Is Jesus making much progress with you? Where have you seen growth in recent days? What is your biggest struggle right now? What are you unwilling to admit or release?

This is what spiritual formation is. It is the on-going process of learning what it means to follow Jesus by opening your eyes, ears, heart and mind to a new way of thinking, believing and living.

This is not easy. Ask Nicodemus.

No doubt his growing pains disrupted his sleep and disturbed his relationships. The man who had all the answers was now questioning everything.

No, spiritual formation is not easy, but it is transformative. Spiritual formation, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, will bring the best out in us and lead to true joy and happiness. In many ways, it is like being born again and again and again as we shed old ways of thinking and embrace the lifestyle Jesus modeled.

What is the hardest part for you in this process of becoming more Christ-like? Is it overcoming complacency and taking that first step? Is it an unwillingness to admit you don't know as much as you thought you did and may have confused biblical values with cultural ones? Is it a fear of the unknown that comes with getting out of your comfort zone? Is it a busy schedule which leaves little time for feeding your spirit?

I wonder what you are missing.

To me, this story underscores the importance of spiritual formation, that process of growing and maturing in our faith. Few texts help us see how much our faith needs to expand and mature so we can draw closer to God each day and live for God as best we can.

If Nicodemus, Israel's finest teacher, did not know everything and needed to learn and grow, how much more do we?

If this brilliant scholar was wrong about some things and needed to change his mind, how much more should we?

If this sincere man of faith needed to take that faith to a deeper level, how can we be satisfied where we are?

How does a person grow spiritually? I think this was a question John hoped every individual would ask upon reading about the encounter Nicodemus had with Jesus. 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 learning a priority.

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. I believe this was true for 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 take Jesus' body off the cross and prepare it for burial. I believe Nicodemus buried a dear friend that day.

What steps do you need to take today to develop this kind of relationship with Jesus? I encourage you to take the first one this morning.