

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² 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 unless God is with that person." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ 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?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ 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." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ "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. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "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. ¹⁷ "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.

John 3:1-17

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"Nicodemus' Confusion"

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There are a series of jokes out now about how are there are two kinds of people in the world. For example:

There are two kinds of people in the world: Those who like chocolate and those who have something seriously wrong with them.

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who think a cruise is a foretaste of heaven, and those who think a cruise is the aftertaste of hell.

There are two kinds of people in the world: Those who finish what they start and so on...

There are two kinds of people in the world: Those that suck the life out of every day, and those that let every day suck the life out of them.

There are two kinds of people in the world: those with a sense of gratitude, and those with a sense of entitlement.

There are two kinds of people in the world: Those who walk into a room and say, "There you are!" and those who walk into a room and say, "Here I am!" [ideas here adapted heavily from Leonard Sweet, in illustrations for John 3:1-17, www.Sermons.com.]

There are two kinds of people in the world: Those with the courage to hang on, and those with the courage to let go. (just which is the virtue depends on whether you're riding a bull or raising a child...)

Now before we go any further, let me hasten to add that this is a device of humor – not a reality. In my experience, the only time there are two kinds of people in the world is when my world only has two people in it, and even then, it's iffy. I mean, half of the time, even when I'm by myself, there's a difference of opinion. No, we humans live a gorgeously diverse world of kaleidoscopic beauty and varied gifts, views, and understandings. And even though it can sometimes be hard to navigate, I wouldn't opt to have us all the same. I like meeting different people, hearing different ideas, seeing through different lenses. But even I have my biases. Which brings me back to where we started.

There are two kinds of people in the world: early birds and night owls.

Early birds – my hat is off to you. How anyone can awaken before dawn and be chipper and alert and ready and able to start the day is entirely beyond my comprehension. If the situation demands it, I can be adequately functional in the early morning. I'm even prepared to admit that I've had some mornings where I have seen the sun's rays break over the horizon and heard the birds begin to sing, and witnessed how the sky lights up in pastels and glory, and even experienced the presence of God in profound and sacred ways in the early morning. And I wouldn't trade those moments. But I still need a nap by lunchtime!!!

No, I am a night owl. At the end of the day, the light fades, the stars come out, the traffic slows, the phone goes quiet, business shuts down, the house goes to sleep, and I get a second wind. I've done my best writing in the quiet of the night. I can play with words, ideas, dreams, prayers. I read. I pray. I sit with the silence. I let go of the pressure to perform. And when all those self-doubts, and the "woulda/coulda/shouldas", and worries and fears and frustrations start to come at me at the close of the day, I lay them down at Jesus' feet and I breathe. In with the Spirit, out with anxiety. In with the Spirit, out with anger. In with the Spirit, out with the weight of having to know everything and do everything and be everything. In with the Spirit.

I'm not alone. Nicodemus was a night owl. Lots of scholars argue that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to protect his reputation. And that's possible. He was a Pharisee, after all, which means he was one of about 6000 men or so who had taken a vow before others to uphold the law of Moses. Moreover, he was a leader of the Pharisees, a member of the Sanhedrin, so he was probably wealthy, well-educated, highly respected. Perhaps he didn't want to be seen consulting an itinerate preacher.

But maybe he came to Jesus by night for the same reasons I do. Because that's when the work is done. Because that's when we can lay down the business of the day and get real with another. I get the sense that Nicodemus desperately wants to be real, to be holy, to be godly. All his life, Nicodemus has been told how to get to God. And he's done it faithfully – followed every rule, offered every sacrifice, devoted every bit of energy to doing what's right. But something just isn't right. And he knows it. He's seen Jesus heal. He's heard Jesus preach. And he knows Jesus couldn't do what he does apart from God. He knows Jesus has a connection he doesn't. Nicodemus is no charlatan. He's not a bad guy. He's a genuine seeker. But what's he seeking?

Before we ask that, let me briefly refresh your memory about this particular passage. How I wish we all spoke Greek, because there's a whole bunch of linguistic stuff happening in Greek that we just can't possibly capture in English. The fact is, our translators have done all the work for us. We don't have to figure out what Jesus is saying. Nicodemus did not have that luxury. In particular there are a couple Greek words worth noting. First, there's **Anōthen**, which means both "again" and "from above". Then there's **Pneuma**, which means both "wind" and "Spirit". And lastly, there's **Hypsoō**, (hipsuh-oh) meaning both 'to lift up' and 'to exalt'. [I am indebted to Gail R. O'Day, Commentary on John 3:1-17 in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press) pages 548-553 for her definitions of Anōthen, Pneuma, and Hypsoō.] Nicodemus hears these terms in their most literal sense – that is, biological birth, blowing wind, and lifted symbols. But Jesus uses these terms on multiple levels all at once.

Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark, and Jesus helped him spin the picture just enough to see it all differently. And something begins to click into place for Nicodemus – the faint glimmer of an idea, and it goes like this. For years, decades, Nicodemus has carried the weight, the pressure of his responsibility. Pharisee, councilman, leader, example. That’s a lot to carry. A lot to live up to. And so he constantly claws at the side of the mountain to climb up to God. But what Jesus seems to be saying is that you’ll never be able to do that, so God comes down to you. You don’t have the power to carry the weight of the world, Nicodemus. But you could be a channel for God’s power if you could just let it flow. Let the Spirit move. Go with it. Trust it. Consider that all your life, you’ve been told that God responds to what you do. If I do this, God does that. If I sin, God condemns. If I do good, God rewards. But maybe God wants to take the lead in your life; maybe God wants you to do the responding. Instead of doing good in the hopes that it leads to the love of God, consider that the Love of God may precede the good you do, may be the power behind the good you do. All your life, you’ve followed every rule, offered every sacrifice, devoted every bit of energy to doing what’s right. It’s backwards, Nicodemus. Have you forgotten the reason God gave the law in the first place? It wasn’t just to give you something to do! It was to form a covenant, a relationship, a sacred bond. No wonder he’s disillusioned. No wonder he’s hungry for something. No wonder he’s confused!

Don’t just follow the rules, says Jesus. Follow me. Offer yourself. Devote your energy to being mine. Consider that maybe you don’t have to carry the weight of the world. God’s got it. God so loves the world. And God is working to save the world. Instead, carry the light to those in the dark. Carry hope to those crushed with despair. Let the spirit work.

I want to close this morning with a Fred Craddock story – a parable, really – about how God’s love and grace flows into the world; about staying the course when it’s hard to see the light. The late Fred Craddock, writing many years ago now, explained it this way: “My wife and I have a friend who is a nurse at the tuberculosis hospital. She resigned the other day. She has fellows in there with one lung, half of one lung, or less; little bitty guys lying up in bed. At night, sometimes with nothing but pajamas and robes on, they tied bed sheets together and sneak out through a window, door, or any way; go to a liquor store; get all liquored up; and come back in the chill of the night, wheezing and coughing. She gets the oxygen, she nurses them, she goes over another eight-hour shift. She’s a beautiful woman, but her legs have those big, knotted veins from standing 16 hours to bring this little frail fellow back to breathing again. Finally, it clears up. He’s breathing again; she takes away the oxygen; and he ties the bedsheets together and goes out the window to the liquor store.

“And she quits. Why should I care? He doesn’t care! Let him die.

“The next morning, she goes to work. [From Fred B Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001) p. 41.]. Amen.