A close up of a sign

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**March 8, 2020 – Born Anew**

**Given by Rev. Mattei**

During the desert temptations (last week’s gospel, Mt. 4:1-11), Jesus affirmed his identity and vocation: he is the Son of God and bows only to God. Even his own needs for survival, authenticity, belonging, and mattering are submitted to the authority of God and can be satisfied only in God. In line with this, Early Christian manuscripts and commentators report a closing sentence to what is commonly called “The Lord’s Prayer,” which is not present in the official gospels.[[1]](#footnote-1) The prayer, as we know it, ends with the sentence “For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.” Such a closing reveals Jesus’ attitude of surrender to God and the humility necessary for life in God.[[2]](#footnote-2) Surrender and humility allow for the spiritual and the material, the internal and external, the heaven and earth in us to align. In other words, they prepare the ground for an encounter with God and the enjoyment of life eternal.

Nicodemus (Jn. 3) was missing such an experience and sought Jesus out. He was aware of Jesus’ intimate connection with God (v. 2). Jesus had something special going on which he admired and also wanted to have but didn’t know how. He was an honest but also a fearful person. The text acknowledges that he together with the rest of the Pharisees regarded Jesus as a teacher sent from God. They “knew” it because they saw the “signs” that Jesus gave in testimony of his intimacy with God. Yet, that knowledge was not serving him: head knowledge, as important and necessary as it is, is not enough to know God. It’s not enough to know about God. We want to know God.

We are more than just our heads. Did you ever come across a very intelligent person who had succeeded in the business world but was lacking social skills and emotional maturity? Did you also ever enter a room where the tension was so thick it could be cut with a knife or sensing negative energy in someone’s presence? Cognitive (head) intelligence is extremely important and needs to be cultivated but so is sensorial (body) and emotional (heart) intelligence.

Nicodemus was honestly in search of that “something” that he was missing by approaching life only from a head perspective. Jn. 3 is a very appropriate text for Lent. Our journey is not only one of accompaniment of Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. Our journey is also one of discovery of who Jesus is for us once again. We are invited to step into Nicodemus’ shoes and check if we approach Jesus from our head standpoint only or if we are humble enough and willing to engage a deeper kind of knowledge, one that will help us assess our sensorial and emotional knowledge. Such is the invitation to be “born from above”; only this kind of birth enables one to “see God’s Kingdom” (v. 3). But how, one could ask paraphrasing Nicodemus, can such a birth happen? Jesus replied to him that this rebirth happens through “water and the Spirit,” (v. 5) an allusion to baptism and its necessity. It’s not that baptism saves by itself. What saves is the action of the Spirit that is ready to scoop up the one who in faith is willing to relax, to open to God, and to surrender all control. Renewal in the Spirit is what is meant by birth from above. And this too cannot be controlled for no one knows where the Spirit comes from or leads to (v. 8). Spiritual renewal happens not just in the mind but also in the body and in the psyche.

But heavenly things cannot be perceived without connection to earthly things. Hence, Jesus’ mention of water: water can be life sustaining but also death producing; it represents the magnificence of the gift of life as well as the ugly, violent and challenging moments of life. God wants to be known through the beauty and even terror producing energy of God’s creation; we ascend to God’s presence as we descend into God’s reality (v. 13a)! The “knowledge” that God requires is *trust* in God and may be obtained by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the one who is lifted up for love of us (vv. 13b-16). Assuming an attitude of respect and genuine humility prepares us to see the sacred in all things created.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night (v. 1) suggesting that he was obviously afraid of the opinion of the Pharisees. His close association with them and the privilege and status that such a connection may have provided did not allow him to be clear about his own values.[[3]](#footnote-3) When people are so fused with each other, it’s hard to tell who is who, they finish each other’s sentences and lose the ability to think for themselves. Nicodemus was genuinely interested in Jesus’ mission and identity, and sincerely desired understanding. But at the moment he couldn’t fully grasp what he had begun to glimpse in Jesus. Maybe, his academic formation and party association were still too influential to allow him much freedom of movement. Sometimes, our allegiances obscure our thinking and our independence, and we go along with the pack. People normally do not consciously choose evil, but they choose something that appears good inside of their framework. We have to expose our frame of reference if our spiritual journey is to go anywhere. Often when we think we “got it” and have “arrived,” Jesus challenges us further. Lamenting our inability to see and repenting of our stubbornness to insist on our ways are first steps (in the night?) of faith. The saving gift of the Son of God is available to all who receive and believe in him: he came not for condemnation, but to bring light into a world of darkness (vv. 17-18).

Jesus forms new children of God through the gift of truth for all who are open to his word. Nicodemus came to Jesus expecting to be confirmed in what he “knew.” Jesus pushed him beyond personal or group “static” knowledge into a trust relationship with God that “evolves” and cannot be controlled, predicted or manipulated; a *trust knowledge* that comes from God and goes where God leads (Gen. 12).

Let us pray: Gracious and holy God, give us diligence to seek you, wisdom to perceive you, and patience to wait for you. Grant us, O God, a mind to meditate on you; eyes to behold you; ears to listen for your word; a heart to love you; and a life to proclaim you; through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, page 76)

1. Lk. 11:1-4; Mt. 6:9-13 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://av1611.com/kjbp/faq/holland_mt6_13.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. He will later; see Jn. 7:45-51 and 19:38-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)