

Genesis 12:1-4
John 3:1-17

“Figuring Out Jesus”

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Who is Jesus? - That’s what a man named Nicodemus wants to know – he wants to “figure him out.” The controversial rabbi has hit town. He has entered the city of Jerusalem, creating quite a commotion, and attracted a great deal of attention to his ministry already. He has even quite literally ‘whipped up’ the Passover festivities into a frenzy by driving the money changers out of the temple – an event that takes place quite early in John’s telling of the Gospel, the 2nd chapter.

Nicodemus is a learned man – he possesses an inquiring mind; he wants to know, and wants to be “in the know.” He is also said to be a leader of the Jews, perhaps even a member of the ruling council. He seems to be a ‘take charge’ kind of guy, who has no problem going directly to the source of any controversy, to get first-hand information. So he seeks Jesus out so as to meet this ‘unconventional’ rabbi, and thus get a personal read on him.

Interestingly though, Nicodemus chooses to arrive “at night.” He must want to conduct his interview of Jesus – (or is this an interrogation?) – anyway, he wants to be safe from public view and scrutiny. Is he afraid to let his fellow Pharisees know of his curiosity about Jesus? Is he afraid that if he includes other Pharisees in the visit that they will get immediately defensive, and thus not be as rationally objective as he plans to be? Or, has he been sent as a kind of emissary from the council?

Interesting that he begins the conversation with Jesus by saying, “WE know...” Who is this “we”? Is he merely protecting his own, personal curiosity by making it sound as if others are curious too, or is he actually representing others? If he is representing others, undoubtedly it is the “people in the know” – the people in power – the “informed reader” – the more educated ‘intellects’ of the day.

“We know that you have come from God...” says Nicodemus. Perhaps that is offered as a compliment, meant to put Jesus at ease.... Of course ... it could be just a trap. Jesus has been doing and saying some strange things along with performing some miraculous things. So if Nicodemus can get Jesus to openly declare, “Yes, I have come directly from God,” then he can at least declare Jesus to be an arrogant pretender, who is on the brink of blasphemy.

Jesus oddly does not seem to get drawn into Nicodemus’ question. He rather offers a response that doesn’t seem to fit the question. “I tell you, no one can see

the kingdom of God without being born from above.” (John 3:3). The whole notion hits Nicodemus like a riddle. How could somebody be born after growing up and growing old? But Jesus insists you must be born “from above.”

And then pressed further, Jesus uses another interesting image: wind. What does Nicodemus have to do to get whatever it is that Jesus offers? Jesus responds by speaking of “birth from above” and of the free uncontrollable movement of the wind. Nicodemus finds that this rabbi, Jesus, is offering something other than simply a new technique, some sort of new program of religion, so he is confused.

Here is this learned man trying to “figure Jesus out.” And Jesus implies that he is not to be “figured out, or at least not to be figured out for our own devices.... The only way we can get into his kingdom is “from above.” It is not some technique, or twelve step program that we undertake to get in this kingdom; it is rather something that God undertakes.

Babies do nothing to decide or choose to be born. So, in making “birth” a central image in this discussion, Jesus seems to point to our relationship with God as primarily something God does, rather than something we do. That’s a hard lesson for us do-it-yourself, hardworking, individually-minded modern folks to learn.

We modern folks, like Nicodemus, tend to be high achievers who are pretty adept at using reason to “figure things out.” That means we are also big believers in the power of the will, so we often “will” ourselves into finding a solution.

Neuroscientist Sandra Almet, author of *Why You Leave Your Car Keys but Never Forget How to Drive* is an expert on this notion of “will”- power. She notes that psychological studies show that all of us actually have a limited reserve of what we call “will power.” Furthermore, our will power can be depleted by a wide range of behaviors that require self-control. So if you are using will power to control your spending habits, that takes away some the will power you need to stay on a diet and lose weight.

Dr. Almet sites a study called “the Radish Experiment.” In that experiment, college students were asked to solve a puzzle. What they did not know was that the puzzle was impossible to solve. The students, all in the same room at the same time, were divided into two groups, with one group eating radishes while they attempted to solve the puzzle, while the second group was given chocolate chip cookies to eat.

Would you believe it? – the students who were eating radishes gave up 50% sooner, than those who were wolfing down chocolate chip cookies – in other words, they had 50% less will power to ‘figure it out.’

Then another group of student, who did not have to eat anything and who were told they did not have to finish the puzzle if it proved too difficult, were added to the mix in the room. Their performance was even worse than the students who were trying to eat radishes and solve the puzzle. Dr. Almet says that their lack of performance indicates that will power is a bit like muscle – use it or lose it. Will power apparently gets better by trying - by exercising it.

So to summarize, Dr. Almet says that we should learn not to set too many goals that require an exercise of our will power all at the same time. For if we are using a great deal of will power to achieve one project we will have that much less will power to achieve that other project as successfully. However, based on “the Radish Experiment,” when you go to the gym to work out, you are improving your will power’s CAPACITY. It will take less will power to go to the gym the next time, because you are improving your will power for that one activity – The old ‘use it or lose it’ principle.

I share all of this because one of the things that makes us North American, contemporary human beings distinctive is our drive for self-improvement, hence our use of will power. One the most important, oft-quoted pieces of our American literature is not the U.S. Constitution, but rather Ben Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. When we think about it, Franklin has provided us with one this nation’s first self-improvement handbooks: “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.” “A penny saved is a penny earned.” “Either write something worth reading, or do something worth writing.” The fact is, Ben Franklin’s sayings are often quoted and often confused with God’s scriptures. But notice that Franklin’s sayings are mostly based on human will power – it takes will power to accomplish the tasks he suggests in his pithy sayings.

In today’s Gospel, Nicodemus asks the question “how?” - in essence implying by that question that it is an act of our will power imposed upon a prescribed method that brings one to faith. I expect that many of us are right there with Nicodemus, ready for THE answer as to how to have faith – ready for THE right formula, ready for THE right technique. Then Jesus responds by talking about two of the most passive, uncontrollable events: birth and wind. Did you notice that we can have no control whatsoever of either of those two?

Could it be then that our relationship with God is not based on OUR WILL POWER - on our control, but rather our relationship comes as a gift? It comes as grace – it comes as something that God gives rather than what we achieve. “We are saved by grace” was the way the reformed church has traditionally put this essentially gifted quality of God’s grace for us.

Maybe the point of this can be summarized by of all things, a campaign slogan from a recent presidential election. “Yes we can!” was the campaign slogan of one party. “No you can’t” retorted the critics from the other political party. During that same time I saw a sign in front of a church that zeroed in on the real truth. The sign read: “No You Can’t! But God Can!” That’s precisely the point Jesus was making to Nicodemus and hence to us. We can’t “will” or control our birth; we can’t control the wind Only God can!

James Finney went to study spirituality and prayer under the great monk and scholar Thomas Merton. Finney tried hard to improve his prayer life. But after struggling, Merton led Finney to see that prayer was as much a matter of receiving God as doing something to get God:

Writes Finney in *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere*: “Merton told me once to quit trying so hard in prayer. He said: How does an apple ripen? It just sits in the sun. A small green apple cannot ripen in one night by tightening all its muscles, squinting its eyes and tightening its jaw in order to find itself the next morning miraculously large, red and juicy beside its small green counterparts. Like the birth of a baby or the opening of a rose, the birth of the true self takes place in God’s time. We must wait for God, we must be awake; we must trust in God’s hidden action within us.”

Some years ago, as I traveled around Sarasota on my pastoral duties, I passed by a billboard that proclaimed the arrival of a team of management gurus who could – according to the advertisement – CHANGE YOUR LIFE! This team - for a mere \$200 registration fee - promised to transform you and your business. I remember the ad because the meeting was to be held ‘appropriately’ on April 1st!

But the ad went on to say that they would teach you how to get along with your employees, set high goals and standards for your company, double your business income, and achieve a host of other grand results that were offered as ‘bullets’ on that sign. In other words, sign up with these gurus – these experts and they will give you all the secrets for how to get whatever it is that you are just dying to have for your business, and maybe even your life....

Contrast that with what Jesus is offering Nicodemus. Jesus doesn’t offer any techniques for belief; no sure-fire, knockdown management formulas for success. He only offers “wind” and “birth” – two experiences that come to us as gifts rather than as our own savvy achievements. This birth, this relationship with God is in all honesty illusive, and Jesus compares it to wind whistling in the treetops: We can hear the wind, and we can see its results; but it is not something we can control, and we will never be able to do so.

Later, when the critics of Jesus are trying to arrest him, it is only Nicodemus who defends Jesus - defending this 'unconventional rabbi' by stating that their own law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing (7:50) – (just as Nicodemus had already done.)

And then Nicodemus shows up one final time in John's gospel: He is assisting Joseph of Arimathea in caring for the body of Jesus when he is removed from the cross and placed in the tomb (John 19:39-42). So somehow in this evening of discussion, in this nighttime of interrogation, Jesus got through to Nicodemus. Nicodemus heard something –maybe something blowing in the wind - but something he finally understood. We might even venture the thought that Nicodemus had been born from above.

Reformer Martin Luther once labeled John 3: 16, "the Gospel in Brief." He explained that the passage, "... God so loved the world that he gave his only son..." reveals that the power behind God's movement toward us, is the power of love. God loves the whole world in the whole booming cosmos. And in this great love, God sent the Son to bring us eternal life – that is salvation for the world. This is purely a gift of God rather than the result of any human endeavor.

It is the smart ones, like Nicodemus, as well as some of the perhaps not-so-smart ones who sometimes have the most difficulty comprehending the grace and scope of God's great love for us in Christ. We can be drawn to think of Christ as some kind of program to "figure out", or a technique or a manual for faith, rather than as the full embodiment of grace – of God's gift.

So today, let's simply receive the gift of God... Let's let this gentle, life-changing wind blow through our lives; let's simply enjoy the grace of rebirth. Amen.