

“Dare To Be A Nicodemus”**June 9, 2024****John 3:1-17****Preached at Messiah Lutheran, Joliet Illinois****By Pastor David Nygard**

All Bible references in this sermon are taken from the New International Version (NIV)

John 3:1-17 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. **2** He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” **3** Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

4 “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” **5** Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. **6** Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

7 You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ **8** The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” **9** “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. **10** “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? **11** Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. **12** I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. **14** Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, **15** that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” **16** For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

I always enjoy when you and I get to talk together. I like to give our pastors a morning off. They work hard, give us so much and are rapidly aging. Who knew that I would become the young pastor? You might be wondering what my sermon is about. It's about twenty minutes.

Pastor Stier has been sharing how we received the Bible. Do you ever

read the Bible? Some parts are easy to understand. Other parts would puzzle John the Baptist. When I read the Bible it helps me to put myself into the story or into a Bible verse. I ask myself "Why did the main character in the story act like he did?" I wonder what my actions and feelings might have been in that situation. If I find a great Bible promise I sometimes put my name into it.

The Gospel of John is a good place to make Bible stories personal. John doesn't write down long sermons that Jesus gave to large crowds. No, he tells us about the individuals that Jesus met in life and how he interacted with them. We read how Jesus gave his full attention to the woman at the well, and the lame man who couldn't get into the healing waters. We learn about Jesus talking with Mary and Martha at their brother's funeral. Perhaps the most interesting story happened when Nicodemus came knocking on Jesus' door. It's no coincidence that my sermon is called "Dare To Be A Nicodemus".

Nicodemus is mentioned three times in the Bible; only in John's Gospel. But what happened to Nicodemus; what he heard and did later greatly touches our faith. Nicodemus was a Pharisee; a religious teacher of the Jews. He was very educated; highly respected. People came to him with their problems. Nicodemus was a member of a group called the Sanhedrin .

The Sanhedrin didn't know what to do with Jesus. They were all about laws, rules and being perfect. Their God was not merciful. But Jesus preached about God's unconditional love and his amazing grace. Jesus prayed for everyone; even street people, even great sinners, and God answered his prayers. In their jealousy the Sanhedrin plotted to kill Jesus.

And so it was very surprising that one night Nicodemus came knocking on Jesus' door. He didn't come with trumpets blaring: Tah dah! He wasn't surrounded by tiktokers and influencers. No, he came alone, quietly, almost like he didn't want anyone to see him.

John doesn't give us the reason for Nicodemus being secretive. What do you think? Here's a place where we can put ourselves into the story. What did he fear? Why do you hide your faith? What causes people to hide their faith and stop coming to church?

Here are four possibilities. **In the case of Nicodemus, #1) Maybe he was afraid of what people might think of him.** He liked the power and respect given to a Pharisee. He didn't want to embarrass himself by going against the other Pharisees. In the same way Christians are often made to look like fools in the media. They call us haters for not following the crowd. It's easy for us to fear

the crowd and hide our faith.

It could be that **#2) Nicodemus was afraid to admit that he had questions about God.** People came to him for advice. He spoke for God. But by coming to Jesus, Nicodemus was admitting that he didn't know everything. People come to me for help. It would be difficult for me to admit that I have questions too. How about you?

Perhaps **#3) Nicodemus was afraid of what Jesus might ask of him.** Maybe there were changes in his life that Nicodemus was afraid to make. I believe that people avoid God, church and Jesus because they think that God might ask them to become a missionary, or to stop drinking, or to forgive their worst enemy. What fear keeps you from seeking Jesus with all of your heart? How's that working for you?

One last idea. Maybe **#4) Nicodemus hid going to Jesus because he feared that he might be the one person that God couldn't help.** It would be horrible if Nicodemus was the one individual that Jesus couldn't heal, forgive or give a second chance at life. The fear of failure, the fear of looking foolish often keeps us from trying something new; even something wonderful. How sad is that?

Think about this. Whatever fears bothered Nicodemus, he came to Jesus anyway. **I challenge you: Dare to be a Nicodemus. No matter what your fears might be, come to Jesus anyway... in your prayers, in your thoughts and on Sunday mornings.**

The next thing that we notice about Nicodemus, is that he had plenty of questions. Nicodemus said, **“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”** What he meant was “Who are you? Why did God send you?” When Jesus told him that he needed to be born again, Nicodemus asked **“How can this be?”** The remarkable thing is that Jesus treated every question as being important.

What questions do you have for Jesus? What questions hinder your faith? Maybe you wonder “Who are you? What are you asking of me?” Perhaps you question “Why do bad things happen to good people?” or “Why isn't my prayer being answered?”

I challenge you. Dare to be a Nicodemus. Ask Jesus your questions. If it's important to you, it's important to Jesus. Keep on asking. God might

whisper an answer in your thoughts. Maybe you'll find it by reading the Bible. Believe it or not, Jesus even speaks to us in sermons. I know, it surprises me too.

When Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again, he had no clue what Jesus meant. Nicodemus asked “**How can someone be born when they are old?**” But Jesus was talking about a spiritual rebirth; a supernatural change in our body, soul and spirit, that only comes from God.

Nicodemus took everything very literally. He knew “exactly” how God works in our lives. Nicodemus had God boxed into his little ideas and religious rules. But God can't be limited or boxed in. Jesus told him, “**You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.**”

Jesus compared the Holy Spirit to the wind. No one can control the wind. You can't see it, but you can feel it. You can't stop it. God, the Holy Spirit comes and goes in our lives freely. God isn't limited to our faith or our doubts. He can change every heart. God can find a way where there seems to be no way.

How do you try to limit God? When do you think “God can't solve this problem.” or “God can't change this person.”? Anytime we think God can't do this or that, God answers “Ok, watch me!”

The Holy Spirit comes into our lives through our baptism. Jesus said “**...I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water (which means baptism) and the Spirit...**”

If you've been baptized, the Holy Spirit lives in your heart. In baptism the Spirit changes our relationship with God. We become a child of God. The Spirit teaches us to pray. The Spirit reminds us of God's promises. The Spirit gives us the courage to believe that Jesus died for us and that we are forgiven. All of these changes are a process. We grow into it bit by bit. Your story and process will be uniquely your own.

Think about this. Nicodemus still did not understand everything completely, but he learned not to limit God's plan for him. **Dare to be a Nicodemus. Tell God “Change my heart O Lord, melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.”**

It was then that Jesus told Nicodemus the greatest Bible promise. Jesus said “**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that**

whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16. It's the one Bible verse that most people have heard. It came from Jesus' lips.

Jesus tells us **“For God so loved the world”** God isn't angry. He doesn't judge us. God, the Father loves us. **“He gave his one and only Son”** Jesus isn't just a teacher or a good guy, he is truly God's only Son. God sent Jesus to die on the cross to pay the price of our sins, so **“that whoever believes in him, shall not perish but have eternal life.”** The word “believes” means to “trust” him, “rely on” him, “follow” him. If we believe that he died for us, we shall live forever. Do you believe that? If not, why not.

I told you that I like to put my name into Bible verses and claim them. For example, **“For God so loved David that he gave his one and only Son...”** Let's try it with your name. Wherever there is a noun in **John 3:16**, I'm going to raise my hand, and I want you to say your name outloud. Ready?

“For God so loved _____ (David) that he gave his one and only Son, that (when) _____ (David) ... believes in him (he, she) shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16. Make that verse your own personal promise from Jesus.

Nicodemus could not have understood that verse because Jesus had not yet died on the cross, but he went home and thought about it. **Dare to be a Nicodemus. Take the promises of Jesus home and think about them. Claim them as your own.**

We know that Nicodemus believed in Jesus because of what happened sometime later. Some weeks and months had passed by. The Pharisee's hatred and jealousy for Jesus had increased. They wanted to seize the Lord and kill him. But Nicodemus spoke up before everyone, **“Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?” John 8:50-51** Nicodemus was not ashamed or afraid anymore. He defended Jesus! The Pharisees mocked and cursed Nicodemus, but he spoke up anyway. **Dare to be a Nicodemus. When people curse Jesus or deny him today, don't be afraid to say “I believe in Jesus. He is my Savior.”** It doesn't matter what people might think.

Later when Jesus was crucified on the cross, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, took his dead body, prepared it for burial and placed him in the tomb. Nicodemus had come a long way from being that frightened man who knocked on Jesus' door. (John 19:38-42) His fear had turned to faith, and grown into love.

Dare to be a Nicodemus! God bless you. God bless Pastor Dave and Dana Stier, their son Alexei and Dana's mother Diane, as they leave us to lead a congregation in Georgia. Let them know that they will be missed. Amen.