

I Wish I'd Known
What Good is God?, Part V
John 3:1-17
March 27, 2011
Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

Nicodemus comes to Jesus when he realizes there's something he doesn't know, something that he wants to know; maybe something he needs to know. He says, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." But there is something unsettled, uncertain for Nicodemus still; he wants to know more. Jesus says something about being born "from above," and Nicodemus can't figure out what that means. He is clueless: "How can these things be?" he asks. Nicodemus is in the dark.

He even comes to Jesus literally in the dark of night. Remember last week, the woman at the well came in the light of noon, but Nicodemus comes in the dark of night. He is ashamed of being seen. After all, he is a leader in the temple, he's supposed to know everything. For some reason he is willing to show Jesus that he doesn't know everything. In fact, he doesn't even get what Jesus is telling him. "How can anyone be born after growing old?" he asks. Nicodemus is operating on a literal level—you can't be born again when you've already been born once, we all know that. But Jesus is operating on a spiritual level.

This story in the Gospel of John comes just before the story we read last week about the Samaritan woman. The writer of John is showing us how both a respected, educated Jewish man and a poor, outcast Samaritan woman can learn something from Jesus. It makes us see that this prophet, this rabbi, this Savior of the world, has a message for everyone.

There are turning points in our lives when we find ourselves wanting to go back to square one, to begin again. It may be because of some realization or some mistake. Or maybe it's because of a crisis in our lives. Someone said, "I want to start from scratch; but where is scratch?" (Elias Canetti). Maybe this is what Nicodemus was looking for.

Philip Yancey says he wishes he'd known certain things when looking back on his life. He's speaking to the students at the Bible college he attended in the 60s, trying to give some advice. But rather than preach to them (which he figures they get plenty of), he speaks from his own experience.

"I wish I'd known how to appreciate two worlds at once," he says. He's talking about the secular world and the sacred world, the material world and the spiritual world. He doesn't think it's a good idea to live in a bubble, sheltered from the real world. You can't practice your faith if all you do is live in a bubble. Karen Armstrong has a new book out called *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. The first step is to "learn about compassion." You can't learn about compassion, just praying and reading the Bible with people who are like yourself. To put your faith into practice, you have to step out of your comfort zone and touch poverty, talk to immigrants, learn about people who experience pain and suffering.

Volunteering in the community or going on a mission trip helps us experience another world and learn about compassion. One of the experiences my children had that I am grateful for is Sierra Service Project (SSP). This is an ecumenical program where church youth groups go to work on Indian reservations and rebuild houses. I remember when Eric first got home after a week working on a reservation. He was so moved by the experience, meeting people who lived in poverty, living out different values from ours that impressed him. The representatives from the tribe talked to the high school kids about community and sharing. Eric came away feeling like he had learned much more than he had given. That year his group cleaned out trash in a back yard and built a wooden deck on a home with a ramp so the older member of the family could come and go by wheelchair. The kids had no experience with carpentry; they were led by a college student who had a little experience, it was a little like the blind leading the blind. But they learned to ask questions, follow directions, work together, and get the job done. If you asked Eric about his faith, he would have told you about working on a reservation in SSP. This is an opportunity churches in our Conference give our youth: to experience two worlds, to get out of the bubble and develop compassion.

"I wish I'd known how to nurture the inner life," says Yancey. He cites the Pharisees for being more concerned about external rules and less concerned enough about inner strength and core values. You may find that your inner life suffers when you are stressed and pulled in too many directions. Sometimes you need to find the quiet center again, in prayer, in meditation, in music, or in nature. The goal should be to live in harmony between the inner self and the world around us, in the family, in work, and in society. Someone came to me from our church community recently, in a job transition, aware of her feelings in a new way. The feelings were raw and tears were right at the surface. On one level, the job change was stressful and hard, but in another way, she felt she was opening herself to trusting her inner strength, or what I might call trusting God, to be her guide. She said, she somehow was letting go of the outside pressure and finding an inner core and a sense that all would be all right. In this crisis, this person is nurturing her inner life and letting it lead.

"I wish I'd known more humility," says Yancey. It's easy to think we know all the answers. When we were young we tended to think we knew all the answers. The wise person knows how much there is yet to know. And when we are humble about the relationships of our lives, we may realize how little we really know even the people we love. Perhaps we need to focus more on the other person and less on ourselves. In religion, perhaps we need to be open to learning about different religious traditions and not closed to only looking at one way of understanding God. Perhaps there is something yet to learn about faith that we can learn from people whose views are different from ours. I think the best teachers are the ones who admit they don't know everything. My all-time favorite minister and preacher, a man named Dick Ernst, said once in a sermon, he was in a preaching class and at the end of giving his sermon as a student, the professor critiqued him and asked, "Where in that sermon was grace?" And so Dick learned that in every sermon there needs to be the message of grace. Because he shared this shortcoming, his own failure to include grace in an early student sermon, I remember this one story more than any other sermon illustration he gave over eight years of preaching. In humility, there is strength.

"I wish I'd known grace here," Yancey says as he finishes his speech to the students at his old Bible college. He told the audience that since being there in school he had come to know a God who loves the rebels along with the "goodie-goodies" who follow the rules. He learned that, in the Bible, God loves David, the adulterer, and Jeremiah, the whiner, and Peter, the traitor, and Saul of Tarsus, the human rights abuser. Last week we talked about how God loves Rahab, the prostitute, and the woman and the well, who was afraid and thirsty for good news.

And today we find Nicodemus hungry for answers and a way to start his life all over again. Jesus says to him: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." "Everyone" —you too— "may have eternal life" (3:16). There's the grace.

But does Nicodemus get it? Where is Nicodemus? He doesn't answer. Did he leave when Jesus started talking about how no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (3:13)? Was he even there to hear the words about God so loving the world that he gave his only begotten son? What happened to Nicodemus? He disappeared!

Nicodemus is hurting in some way. He wants to begin again, but all he can say is "How?" "How do I find meaning in my life?" It wasn't working for Nicodemus, and he thought Jesus seemed to have a hold on something he didn't understand. But I fear Nicodemus didn't stick around long enough to get the whole message. It was too baffling. And he was too unsure of himself and afraid. He had too many regrets maybe, and didn't dare take the big leap of faith that he figured Jesus was asking him to make.

This week upon the death of Elizabeth Taylor we've been reminded of an amazing acting career and a person with drama not only on the stage, but in her personal life as well. Perhaps her greatest film, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," shows us some very raw human pain and the subject of confronting our fears and how hard it is to begin again. Liz Taylor plays Martha, and Richard Burton, her husband in the film and in real life, plays George. There 's only a bit of plot, the couple invites another couple over for drinks after midnight on a Saturday night, but what evolves in the living-room drama, as a result of drinking and speaking without inhibition, is abuse and exposure. Martha and George insult each other in front of their guests—they talk about things you would never reveal to guests: how much the other one weighs, how much the other one drinks, how much money her father has...and they say things like:

"I can drink you under any table you want, so don't worry about me."

"You got the prize years ago. You've won every abomination award."

"I swear if you existed I'd divorce you."

George tells the guests how his wife lies, and she tells them about a son they never had. They are revealing their secrets, in a crude marital fight in front of the naïve young couple

and in front of the audience. They say to each other:

"Stay on your feet for your guests."

"I'll hold your hand when it's dark and you're afraid of the bogeyman. And I'll tote your gin bottles out after midnight so no one sees. But I will not light your cigarette. And that, as they say, is that."

"Truth and illusion. You don't know the difference."

"No, but we must carry on as though we did."

"Through one failure after another."

"Each attempt more numbing, more sickening than the one before."

"The one thing, the one person I tried to protect...to raise above the mire of this vile, crushing marriage...the one light in all this hopeless darkness! Our son!"

But there was no son. It was a game they played to talk about a son they might have had. Under all the pretenses was fear.

"Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" (Like, "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?")

"I am, George...I am." (The last lines of the film by Elizabeth Taylor)
(http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/w/whos-afraid-of-virginia-woolf-script.html)

You may have fears and regrets, we all do. "I wish I'd..." You fill in the blank... But what if you allow yourself to begin again from *now* forward. What if you start with grace *now*? What if you stay and hear Jesus' whole story that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (17).

This is what it means to be born "from above," or in some translations, to be born "again." It means to begin again by the power of God, not by one's own merit or worth, or held down by the power of one's own messed-up life. It means to relinquish your own self-sufficiency and turn yourself over in glad obedience to God. It means to break the old habits, to cast aside the old fears, and to see the light.

God is the one who keeps you. We said it in our call to worship: "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore" (Psalm 121). Thanks be to God.