

Born of the Spirit

A Sunday Morning Message on March 1, 2026

The 2nd Sunday of Lent

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

John 3:1-17

Rev. Ruth Shilling Hainsworth

Our Scripture text for this morning introduces us to a unique figure we meet only in the stories of John's Gospel. Nicodemus is mentioned several times in John's Gospel, and only in John's Gospel. Most notably he appears in this story as a Jewish religious leader and Pharisee who comes to Jesus at night to ask for more clarity about who Jesus is and how it is that he is able to do the extraordinary things Nicodemus has witnessed. In today's story we learn about their first encounter and what a crucial one it turns out to be.

As always, it is important that we begin with exploring the full context in which this encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus occurs. First, what does it mean that Nicodemus is a Pharisee? The Pharisees "were a Jewish social movement and school of thought during the time of Second Temple Judaism. Following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD, Pharisaic beliefs became the foundational, liturgical, and ritualistic basis for Rabbinic Judaism."¹ They wanted to preserve traditional Judaism as they understood it and believed in the literal interpretation of the law as presented in the Torah. This is critical to understanding how truly extraordinary it was for Nicodemus, who was a prominent Pharisee, to want to meet secretly with Jesus because he was so curious about what he was saying and teaching. It also explains why it was Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. He really didn't want anyone to know he came to talk to Jesus personally because as a traditionalist, Jesus' teachings would have been contrary to everything Nicodemus believed essential to his faith as he understood it, and he himself taught it.

¹ [Pharisees - Wikipedia](#)

Nicodemus begins by acknowledging that Jesus is a Rabbi – a recognized teacher of the Jewish faith as he describes him as one “who has come from God [because] no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” In other words, he is saying to Jesus “I know you are the real deal because of what I have seen you do and heard you teach.” Here’s where the conversation gets interesting because Jesus responds to Nicodemus by saying, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Put another way, Jesus is telling Nicodemus there is much more to what he is seeing and hearing in Jesus. Nicodemus is confused by this rebirth analogy revealed in his response as he asks Jesus how this being born again can be when it is impossible for anyone to return to the womb to be born a second time. We can imagine Jesus shaking his head before patiently explaining to Nicodemus that is not what he’s talking about. Instead, Jesus explains that “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Still Nicodemus is confused, as we are if we are willing to admit it. So again, Jesus continues his explanation by telling Nicodemus that what is born of flesh is flesh – in other words physical human birth is just that, physical – an act of the flesh. So, no, he’s not talking about literally being born again. But, Jesus says, physical birth is not all there is to finding new life. A new life in God comes not from the flesh but from the Spirit. He likens the Spirit to the wind, blowing seemingly aimlessly and yet guided always by God. Still, Nicodemus is totally lost. This is a theological discussion he just cannot grasp, which frustrates Jesus since as a Pharisee, he would be expected to know more about God and how faith works than he has shown thus far in the conversation.

So, Jesus really gets into it now, claiming that Nicodemus’ inability to understand what he is saying just proves that he really doesn’t understand anything about God. He is hearing what Jesus is saying but he is unable to grasp it, to move beyond his own particular belief system. If he can’t let go of that, Jesus tells him, then Jesus

can't possibly explain to him about the "heavenly things" he has come to ask Jesus about. In other words, Jesus is telling Nicodemus that he needs to open his mind and his heart to receive this whole new way of understanding God and God's love. He has to let go of what he thought he knew in order to understand what Jesus is trying to teach him about God's kingdom.

What comes next in the conversation is probably one of the most well known verses in the Bible. John 3:16 is intended as the summation of what Jesus had been trying to explain to Nicodemus that he just could not quite grasp. Jesus says to him, "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." This verse is familiar to us today because it has become foundational in conservative evangelical Christianity. That's why this story about Nicodemus and its entire focus on being "born again" is so critical for us to unpack if we are to comprehend Jesus' teachings and his actions during his short three years of active ministry on earth. On the surface this verse is just a declarative sentence describing the depth of God's love for God's people. Yet, in many respects, it's actual meaning is as clear as mud. Still many evangelical Christians, especially the fundamentalists and Bible literalists, literally hold this verse up as all you need to know about being a faithful follower of Jesus. But is it? Really? I would argue that the understanding of what this verse actually means forms a key piece of the differences between progressive and conservative Christianity.

What do I mean by that? Let me explain. One interpretation of this verse, the one which is behind all those John 3:16 posters held up by devout folks in big crowds, is that all you have to do is repeat this verse – like a magical incantation almost – and then you are saved. Now, most of them will concede that it is actually more to it than just saying it. You have to "believe" what you are saying is true. You have to believe that Jesus is your Lord and Savior and that his entire

purpose in coming to earth from God is to save all the individual fellow believers from eternal damnation for eternal glory in heaven. Theoretically, you also need to be “convicted” in that faith meaning that this belief in Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior is so personally transformative that you become a new person living a life completely changed by that knowledge. Put another way, you will still sin as that is human nature but you promise to do your best not to and to seek forgiveness when you do. Because you don’t want to miss out on that eternal reward which is life after death – heaven – eternal bliss and happiness.

In this interpretation of this text, salvation is a completely personal matter. Your goal is to save yourself from eternal damnation in hell which is what is waiting for those who do not proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior. Once you have been born again, committed yourself to this personal acceptance of Jesus as Savior, of course you require a very clear definition of what is sin, and what isn’t so you are able to sin as little as possible. This is where things really go off the rails since conservative evangelicals see sin everywhere and they gladly take on the role of deciding what is sinful and what isn’t. For example, traditional marriage with traditional stay at home moms – not sinful. Gay marriage, acknowledging love is love even if between two same sex people – sin. Trans men and women – sin because it’s against “nature.” Career women, women in positions of authority and power – sin, because it deters them from fulfilling their rightful roles as wives and mothers. We could go down this rabbit hole for a while but you get my point. This need to clearly define and delineate sin is understandable, I guess. Certainly conservative Christians are free to believe whatever they choose about God and about sin because that is a foundational piece of their faith tradition. The real problem with these declarations of sin is not that they exist for this particular strand of Christianity. The problem is that they want to decide what is and is not sin for everyone, evangelical or not, Christian or not (you should

be Christian they think), believers or atheists. This is because they have decided that all these things they deem sinful, many of which others do not see that way, still have to be seen as sinful by everyone so that they themselves are not tempted to sin by all these others so wantonly sinning all around them. Yikes!

Okay then, deep breath! Be assured there is another interpretation of this verse, the one we as progressive Christians believe and try to live into. In our reading of this same verse, it all comes down to love – the love of God made manifest in Christ. We believe that God’s love made real in Jesus is not restricted by anyone else’s narrow definition of sin. We leave the determination of sin – judgement in other words – totally in God’s hands. We believe we are transformed by our acceptance of God’s gift of love made manifest in Jesus as each of us is challenged every day, in word and deed, to live as Christ taught. We believe that the most important lesson Jesus taught is not the catch phrase of John 3:16 but instead Jesus own interpretation of the “great commandment” from Matthew 22 which is that we are to love God with all that we are and all that we have AND we are to love the other (which we understand to be anyone different from ourselves) as we love ourselves. Another crucial difference is that we also do not believe that the Kingdom of God is only in heaven to be enjoyed by the “saved” at the end of earthly life. We believe the Kingdom of God is right here and right now and that it is up to us – each one of us who claim the name Christian – to work to make the Kingdom of God visible, real and accessible to everyone. We acknowledge that God is much bigger than any box we attempt to put God in and that real sin is trying to constrain God by our own narrow vision and biases. We know that we can only discern God’s plan for us one day at a time, sometimes one hour at a time, as we do our best to live Jesus’ teachings into reality. Finally, we understand the church as the place where we come together as a community of God’s Beloved people to learn and support and practice our faith together.

So we come to the end of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus perhaps leaving with even more questions than he had brought with him on that long ago night. We can certainly sympathize with his confusion at some of Jesus' obtuse answers. And we too are left to ponder a most fitting question during this season of Lent: Have we – have I – been born again through the Spirit into a new person as a result of knowing Jesus and loving God? Only you know the answer to that one. Well, you and Jesus. Dear ones, Lent is precisely the opportunity in the rhythms of the church year to think about this very question, deeply and prayerfully. It is the work of the faithful during these six weeks. The question then is not only how will you answer, but even more importantly, are you willing to do the work your answer could require? Amen.