

Sermon preached by
The Reverend William J. Eakins
at Grace Church in the Southern Berkshires
on March 16, 2014, the Second Sunday of Lent, Year A

He was a traditional senior warden type if there ever was one – a person of distinction and probity, a pillar of the religious community, respected by all and prosperous as well. His name was Nicodemus, and one night he set out to find Jesus and engage him in conversation. In that interchange, Nicodemus got far more than he had bargained for.

“Rabbi,” Nicodemus began, “we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these things that you do unless God is with him.” Now here is the voice of confidence, the voice of one with power and tradition on his side. “We know” are the words that flow naturally from Nicodemus’s mouth, as he, a leader of the Jews, begins a chat with the new rabbi. And what do Nicodemus and those he leads “know?” Well, they are sure that they have Jesus all figured out. They know the source of Jesus’s power. They know how God acts in the world, what can and cannot happen. They know the limits of things, what is possible and impossible. They also know the immutable facts about human beings: that people are born, grow old, they die. They have God and life all figured out, the theological boxes filled in. Nicodemus and his ilk know much or at least they think they do.

“No you don’t,” says Jesus. “No one can really know what is possible with God unless one is born from above, born anew, born of the Spirit.” Thus with his opening response to Nicodemus, Jesus moves outside the boxes, the familiar categories and theological assumptions of Nicodemus’ established, orthodox universe. And poor old Nicodemus is left stammering in disbelief, “How can these things be?”

Nicodemus is actually not so very different from us. There is a human tendency to shrink our religion down to a manageable size, to fit it into the small boxes of our inherited

presuppositions and limited imaginations. We boil the richness of our faith down to slogans like “What would Jesus do?” and reduce the mystery that is God to something that fits on a bumper sticker, “Honk if you love Jesus.” We think we know much when we actually know little. We suppose we know the way things are, the limits of what can and cannot be.

To us, as to Nicodemus, Jesus comes and says, “Think again. The wind of God’s Spirit blows where it chooses and it is beyond your knowing. If you want to be my followers, you must be willing to have your categories redefined, you must be willing to be blown by the Spirit into places you never would have dreamed of going.”

God’s Spirit has led to some surprising and significant changes in my own religious thinking over the years. Take, for example, my understanding of the famous verse from today’s Gospel, John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” I remember the time when this verse pinpointed the crucial importance of being a believer. You see, in the particular Christian culture in which I grew up, the world was divided into two great camps – the “born again” and the “unsaved.” The born again were those who believed in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. The unsaved were those who did not so believe and thus were perishing. As I have grown older, I have come to a different perspective on John 3:16, a perspective in which the emphasis is not on our believing or disbelieving, but on God’s “so loving.” As the very next verse, John 3:17, makes clear, “God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.” From this perspective, the perspective of God’s abundant love, the world is not divided into the saved and unsaved but all of us are enfolded in God’s saving embrace. What matters is not so much who’s a believer and who is an unbeliever, but whether the Spirit of the God whose love is so generous and enduring is living in me.

I blush to say that there was a time when I was opposed to the ordination of women. I remember back in the early 70’s running for election here in Western Massachusetts as a

deputy to General Convention. My platform included putting a stop to what I saw as a strange departure from the plain teaching of Scripture and the tradition of the Church. It seems a blessing to me now that I was never elected. What were once such self-evident, critical and eternal certainties about the proper role of men and women in the Church's ministry, I now see as cultural excess baggage quite rightly set aside. If in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, what were we doing when we limited the ordained ministry by gender? How much the ministry of the Church has been enriched by having our full humanity, male and female, represented at the altar. What a welcome change from the Church I knew when I was ordained 45 years ago – when only boys could be acolytes, only men served on the vestry, and girls and women wore veils on their heads as they polished the silver and cared for linens in the sacristy. But if you had described the changes then in the offering to the Bill Eakins of 1969, he would have been astonished as he exclaimed, like Nicodemus, "How can these things be?"

There was also a time when I would have asked how it could be that the Church would ever consider blessing same-sex unions or ordaining practicing homosexuals. Surely "we know" that such things are wrong! But – do we? I have come to realize that sexual orientation is simply a fact of the way we are born – like having brown hair or blue eyes. If so, then why should the Church limit the blessing of Holy Matrimony to heterosexuals? Why wouldn't God want homosexuals as well as heterosexuals to "love and cherish" each other "until [they] are parted by death?" And if people of the same gender are expressing their God-given sexuality in committed loving relationships, why can't they serve throughout the breadth of the church's ministry? Answers to these questions are, of course, being vigorously debated in the wider Anglican Communion. Some seem to find the very questions themselves to be objectionable and wish they had never been asked. Could it be, however, that the challenges raised to what we once thought we knew about homosexuality are not aberrations but the unfolding work of God's Spirit?

And while I am at it, let me ask why it is that “we know” that only the baptized may receive Holy Communion at the Lord’s Table? There was a time when it was self-evident, when “we knew,” that the family meal of the Church should only be eaten by those who had become full members of the family by Confirmation. Then that restriction was changed to allow Communion for those who had been baptized. But now, I am not at all sure that this limitation is what God wants. After all, none of the apostles who partook of the Last Supper were baptized. They were Jews, not Christians, and they certainly had a faith that was far from either formed or firm. And yet Jesus gave them the bread and gave them the wine and said, “Take, drink, eat, all of you.” Who are we to say who is worthy of coming to the Lord’s Table? Does not the Lord invite all without distinction? Should not whosoever wishes to be fed come and eat?

“If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe,” Jesus asked Nicodemus, “how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?” Jesus was not urging Nicodemus toward a new theology but toward a new life, a life of wonder and worship. Jesus wasn’t trying to get Nicodemus to replace his little theological boxes with slightly larger ones; Jesus was trying to get Nicodemus to do something far more profound – to surrender the “we know” attitude of presumptuous thinking and let himself be born anew.

There is a place, of course, for doctrine and for discipline, for thinking seriously about what we believe and the consequences of such belief for how we live. There is a time for saying “we know.” But let our affirmations of faith always be tempered by a large dose of humility, by the realization that our knowledge is partial and imperfect and that God is always bigger than our theology.

So what of Nicodemus? We are not told in so many words what he made of his surprising conversation with Jesus that night. We do not hear of him again until the end of Jesus’ life. Jesus has been crucified, his body taken down from the cross, and there is Nicodemus now coming to prepare Jesus’s body for burial. This time, however, Nicodemus comes onto the scene not as a questioner but as a disciple. Now he does not

say, “We know.” In fact he says nothing; he simply comes, bearing a precious gift: a mixture of aloes and myrrh, a sweet-smelling ointment whose perfume fills the air and is carried by the wind that blows where it wills.

Note: The preacher acknowledges his debt to The Reverend Tom Long for some of the ideas expressed in this sermon.