Sunday, June 2, 1985
WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?
John 3:1-8

It may be that no passage or story from the Bible is more used and misused than the one just read — the story of Nicodemus coming to see Jesus in secret. Usually, sermons preached on this text dwell almost entirely on the phrase—"born anew," or "born again." Little is said about Nicodemus — why he came that night, what he was looking for in his meeting with Jesus, and what happened as a result of the encounter.

In fact, I think the phrase "born again" is not only misused but overused in our time. According to the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Jesus only used the phrase this one time in talking with Nicodemus. The Gospel records show that Jesus met all kinds of other individuals who were looking for new meaning in their lives, a new understanding of religion, a new understanding of God, a deepening of their spiritual life — and yet Jesus did not use this phrase in describing to them what it means to be one of his followers. As far as we know, Jesus never used the term with his twelve disciples, and they never used it in their own teaching and preaching after the resurrection.

So this morning, let's look at this Pharisee named Nicodemus. We will try to understand why he came to Jesus, what he was looking for, and why Jesus talked to him about being born anew but talked with other people in different terms.

To begin, let's set the scene of this meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus. Jesus and his disciples had had a long and tiring day. Now night had come, and while his disciples took their rest, Jesus found time to be alone. He needed to renew his strength.

While he was alone in the darkness, Nicodemus came to see him in secret. He was a Pharisee, and from the account of this interview and from his further appearances in the Gospel drama, we know something about him.

We can judge from the evidence that he was comparatively wealthy, an aristocrat who belonged to one of the distinguished Jerusalem families. To be a Pharisee meant that one belonged to that most exclusive religious group within the Jewish faith whose members had pledged themselves to spend all their lives observing every detail of the sacred law.

We must not allow their hostility towards Jesus to obscure the fact that in many ways the Pharisees were the finest people, the most morally upright in the whole country.

The name "Pharisee" means "the separated one," and that describes him exactly — a man who separated himself from the world's pleasures in order to lead a life of exemplary devotion and goodness.

We also know that Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews, which meant that he held a seat in the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of seventy members responsible for safeguarding religious orthodoxy and exercising religious jurisdiction over every Jew in the world.

No doubt Jesus was astonished to have this pillar of the establishment come to see him in secret. Most of Jesus' time had been spent with more common people — peasants, farmers, fishermen, merchants — those with little social or economic standing in the community.

Nicodemus probably represented his first point of contact with society's upper crust; and what made it all the more remarkable was the fact that this pillar of the establishment had taken the initiative and came to see Jesus.

One way to understand stories like this one is to see how Nicodemus represents us.

First of all, he was a solid, respectable citizen who believed that he had a built-in strength of character to which Jesus could add little. There are many intelligent, charming, decent people who are not religious because they honestly feel no need of religion. They look upon the practice of piety as a substitute for worldly success, the refuge of the poor, the weak, the morally degraded. They regard religion as a kind of ambulance, the church as a hospital, and Christ as a physician to whom they can turn as a last resort in crisis or old age. In the meantime, they can take care of themselves. They don't need God.
Such people are not anti-religious. They think the ambulance service is a good thing. They want the best ambulance and hospital available if and when they need it — thus they may even contribute to the upkeep of the hospital and honor it with their presence on stated occasions.

Even within the church, we can find a counterpart of Nicodemus. Here he represents what is sometimes called the "in-group." It includes those who have inherited the Christian faith and have never had a reason to doubt it. But at the same time, they know deep down there is a kind of spiritual vacuum in their lives — something is missing. They are not growing and maturing in a spiritual sense. They are looking for something more when they are open enough to admit it.

Secondly, many of us are also like Nicodemus in the way we approach Jesus. There were many in Jesus' time who approached him openly and without hesitation. Sick people tried to touch him, others came to him and asked for help. They seemed to recognize that he could do for them what they could not do for themselves.
Not so with Nicodemus. He came to Jesus secretly and he came to discuss religion in a philosophical, detached way. He didn't want to appear too eager. In fact, in his opening statement, he used the pronoun "we" instead of "I." He didn't want to sound too personally interested. Thus he said, "We know that you are a teacher come from God." He didn't want to become too personally involved.

Thirdly, Nicodemus represents us in that he was not sure what he was looking for. Beyond that opening statement, the Gospel of John doesn't tell us what Nicodemus had on his mind — what he was looking for. All we can do is to make some educated guesses based on how Jesus answered him. Nicodemus was like many people who come to counselors and know they have a problem, but they are not able to clearly communicate what the problem is.
I believe that there are many people who come to a church like this in the same tentative way. They know there is a deeper spiritual side to life but don't know quite how to ask the question. They come searching — yet are not sure exactly what they are looking for.

What was Nicodemus looking for? Perhaps he had heard Jesus preach and seen him perform miracles, and each time had come away persuaded that, whoever or whatever else he might be, this young ex-carpenter from Nazareth had a unique relationship with God and Nicodemus wanted to have a similar kind of relationship with God.

There was no question that Jesus possessed something, a quality of life for which he, Nicodemus, despite all his wealth and social prominence, had passionately longed, but which

he had never been able to find in his own practice of religion. An irresistible urge drove him to seek Jesus out and talk with him privately. Behind all his veneer of piety and respectability was an aching void that Christ alone could fill.

Jesus helped him to see what he was looking for — that's why in the conversation Jesus said at one point — "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Like many of us, Nicodemus did not understand, or rather misunderstood, what Jesus was talking about — he wondered and asked, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

So Jesus had to explain further. He was talking about a spiritual rebirth — so that Nicodemus would begin to see the whole world and God and his relationship to God in a new way.

As I mentioned earlier, this is the only incident in the Bible where Jesus used the term, "born anew." When other people came to Jesus looking for a new and deeper relationship with God and with others — he gave different prescriptions. To some, like his disciples, he said simply— "Follow me." To another person he said, "Sell all you have and give the money to the poor and then come follow me." To yet another person who was looking for something more in his life and in his religion, Jesus said, "Go and love people and be a neighbor to them in the same way as the Good Samaritan loved and helped people."

I see and hear about a lot of people who claim to be "born anew" Christians, but there aren't too many who claim to be "sell all you have, give to the poor and follow me" Christians, or "Good Samaritan Christians."

Jesus was a superb spiritual counselor. When someone came to him with a question about how to get more closely connected with God and the spiritual forces of the universe, he first pointed out the blocks or barriers in that person's life which had to be removed. Each one of us has our own blocks or barriers.

I saw a cartoon the other day which showed a physician standing at the bedside of a patient, and this patient was looking very upset and sour. The doctor was saying to him, "You should take it easy for a while, Mr. Harner. You've been infected by the virus of hate."

Just as we are not always aware of exactly what we are looking for in life, so also we are not always aware of the barriers within us that are blocking God's Spirit or God's love. On the other hand, many of us are willing to let God's Spirit and love enter our lives, but we want to reserve one little corner of life where we keep God out. For example, some of us don't want God messing around with how we use our money. Others don't want God messing around with our hates or resentments. Still, others of us, like Nicodemus, don't want God messing around with our understanding and practice of religion. And there are others who don't want God messing around with how they run their business, or family, or marriage.

In the case of Nicodemus, he was so tied to the old way of seeing the world and of seeing God that he was blind to the activity of God here and now. That's why Jesus said to him — you must be open to seeing God and the world in a new way — you need a new spirit about you. You need to become like a child — be born anew.

So Nicodemus represents us in these ways:

(1) He was a solid, respectable, religious individual, but yet sensed something was missing in his life; (2) He approached Jesus timidly, secretly, and hesitantly — not sure that he really wanted to find out what was missing in his life; and (3) He was not sure what he was looking for, but his encounter with Jesus helped him to discover what it was. He wanted a vital, fulfilling relationship with God. He wanted his religion to be something more than it had been.

And this leads to a fourth way in which Nicodemus represents some of us:
(4) Although Jesus showed him what he was looking for and how he could have it, he still missed it. He was not willing to take the risk and let God's Spirit take over his life. We see in him the type of person who can achieve honor in church and community and still miss the greatest thing in life.

Later in the New Testament stories, when the Sanhedrin decided to do away with Jesus, Nicodemus came weakly to his defense. However, his small protest went unheeded and the murderous plot reached its climax on Calvary. In the end, the best that Nicodemus could do for Jesus was to help take his mangled corpse down from the cross and provide the materials for a decent burial.

It might've turned out differently. Nicodemus could've been born anew — become a changed man, ready to use all his influence and to sacrifice all his wealth and prestige for the sake of Christ. Perhaps his name could've figured prominently in the early church as one who proclaimed fearlessly the good news of the risen Christ. Yet in all probability, he never knew that Christ lived on. After the burial of Jesus, we never hear of Nicodemus again.

So it happens to many respectable people. They admire Jesus. They go to church. They encounter Christ in worship and sacrament, but with no real change in their lives. I hope this is not the case for you here this morning.

Too often for most of us, when we think of conversion, of being born anew, or of turning to God, we commonly think of prodigals suddenly turning homeward, of someone in deep trouble suddenly seeing the light. Such miracles of personal renovation do occur, but some of the most notable conversions are of another kind — church members who have never doubted Christianity, who have for years been acquiescent in it and observant in its outward expression, who suddenly make a great discovery — it works! It actually works! God's Spirit is within them and around them. This Spirit can be trusted.

Eternal life begins here and now. When translated into terms of daily life, as a resource of inward power, overcoming fear, reinforcing courage, loving one's neighbor, making one an adequate personality equipped for life, able to do what one ought to do and to endure what one must stand, it works! God grant some such conversions here today. Amen.