Sunday, March 11, 1990
LESSONS FROM NICODEMUS
JOHN 3:1-17

This passage just read from the Gospel according to John in the New Testament contains two of the most frequently quoted Bible verses. The first is this: Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he or she cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3) The second: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Not only are these two Bible verses continually quoted, but the reference to the second one, John 3:16, is seen constantly in unusual places. For those of you who watch professional football games on television, have you ever noticed that in almost every game, there is someone who sits in one of the end zones and knows exactly where to sit so that he is in direct line for some of the camera shots — and he is holding up a large poster that has on it, “John 3:16.” I’ve also seen posters with the same inscription in televised baseball games and college football games.

I admire the persistence and ingenuity of the individuals who want others to know the good news that the Christian faith brings to all the world. And I wonder how many people go home and look up the reference in their Bibles. John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life,” is one of the best summaries of the central message of the Gospel.

Both of these frequently quoted sayings of Jesus from the Gospel of John, John 3:3 and John 3:16, were originally spoken to a man named Nicodemus who came to see Jesus secretly one night.

Usually, sermons preached on this story dwell almost entirely on the phrase “born anew,” or as other translations have it, “born again.” Or the sermons focus on John 3:16, “God so loved the world.” Little is said about Nicodemus — why he came that night, what he was looking for in his meeting with Jesus, and how that relates to our own search.

Before we look more closely at Nicodemus and what we can learn from his meeting with Jesus, a few comments might be helpful regarding the often-quoted phrase “born again.”

According to the Gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — Jesus only used the phrase “born again” this one time while talking with Nicodemus. The Gospel records show that Jesus met all kinds of other individuals who were searching for new meaning in their lives, or a new understanding of their religion, or a deeper relationship with God, and yet he did not use this term in telling them what they would need to do to be able to see God’s Kingdom.

As far as we know, Jesus never used the term “born again” with his twelve disciples, and they never used it in their own teaching and preaching after the resurrection.

Now, let’s look at this Pharisee named Nicodemus. We want to discover 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 completed a long and tiring day. Nighttime arrived, and while his disciples were resting, Jesus found time to be alone to renew his strength.

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

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

We must not allow their hostility toward Jesus to obscure the fact that in many ways the Pharisees were the finest people, the most morally upright and respected in that society. The name "Pharisee" means "The Separated One," and that describes Nicodemus exactly — a man who separated himself from the world's pleasures 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.

I suspect Jesus was astonished to have this pillar of the establishment come to see him in secret. Most of Jesus' time had been spent with peasants, farmers, fishermen, and merchants — those with little social 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 that this pillar of the establishment had taken the initiative in coming to talk with Jesus.

One way to understand stories such as this one is to determine how Nicodemus represents us. Let me suggest some ways.

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 feel no need of deepening their faith and commitment to God. They need no such crutch. Their motto is: "God helps those who help themselves." A deepened religious faith, they believe, is 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 of last resort to whom they can turn in crisis or old age. In the meantime, they can take care of themselves.

Such people are by no means anti-religious. They think of the ambulance service as a good thing. They want the best ambulance and hospital and doctor 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. However, at times they sense deep down within themselves a kind of spiritual vacuum — something is missing. There is no spark, no vitality in

their faith. They are not growing in a spiritual sense. They are looking for something more when they are open enough to admit it.

Secondly, many of us are also similar to 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. Some shouted at him in their attempt to get his attention. There's one story about four men who brought their friend on a stretcher, and in order to get to Jesus, they had to go up on the roof and take it apart so they could let their friend down into the room where Jesus was.
Not so with Nicodemus. He came to Jesus secretly and came to supposedly discuss religion in a philosophical, detached way. He didn't want to appear too eager. In his opening statement, he used the pronoun "we," instead of "I." He didn't want to sound too personally interested. He said, "We know that you are a teacher come from God." Isn't it true that some of us approach Jesus only in a tentative, secretive manner? We want to be careful lest we become personally involved and our life is changed.

Thirdly, Nicodemus represents us in that he was not sure what he was searching for. The Gospel of John doesn't tell us what Nicodemus had on his mind. All we can do is make some educated guesses based on how Jesus answered him.
Nicodemus was like so many people who come to counselors and know they have a problem, but they are not able to clearly communicate what the problem is. They know something is wrong in their lives, but are unable to pinpoint it.

I believe there are many people who come to a church like this one for the Sunday worship service with a feeling that there is something missing in their lives but are not sure what it is. They sense there is a deeper spiritual side to life but don't know how to ask the question. They come searching — yet are not sure exactly what they are searching for.

What was Nicodemus looking for? Perhaps he had heard Jesus preach and heal people, 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, a magnetic spiritual quality, and he wanted to have something like that.

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 sought but had never been able to find in his own practice of religion. I believe an irresistible urge led him to seek out Jesus and talk with him privately. Underneath his veneer of piety and respectability was an aching void, and maybe Jesus could help him fill it.

Jesus helped him to clarify 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."

At first, Nicodemus did not understand or rather misunderstood what Jesus was talking about. He was puzzled and asked, "How can an individual 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 fresh way. Notice especially that Jesus never implied that Nicodemus was outside the Kingdom of God. He said, "Unless you are born anew, you cannot see the Kingdom of God." He was saying to

Nicodemus by implication—"You are already in God's Kingdom; you are already a part of God's Kingdom, but you don't see it." "God's Kingdom is all around you, but you are blind to it." Is that your problem?

As I mentioned earlier, as far as we know, this is the only incident in the Bible where Jesus used the metaphor, "born again." When other individuals came to Jesus looking for a new and deeper relationship with God and with others — Jesus gave different prescriptions. To some, such as his disciples Peter, James, and John, he said simply, "Follow me." To another person, he said, "If you want to see the Kingdom of God at work in your life, 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 told the story of the Good Samaritan and then said, "Go and love other people and be a neighbor to them in the same way that the Good Samaritan loved and helped the injured Jew in the ditch."

I see and hear about a lot of people who claim to be "born again" Christians, but there aren't too many who claim to be "Sell all you have, give to the poor and follow me" Christians, or even "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 that had to be removed.

I saw a cartoon the other day that showed a physician standing at the bedside of a very upset and sour patient. 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 what we are searching for, so also we are not always aware of the barriers within us that are blocking God's spirit or God's love or which keep us from seeing the Kingdom of God.

On the other hand, some 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 of us don't want God interfering with our hates or resentments or prejudices.

Nicodemus was so tied to the old way of seeing the world and of seeing God and his own understanding of what God's Kingdom was 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, other people, and the whole world in a new way. You need a new spirit. You need to re-examine your preconceptions. You need to look again at your basic assumptions about the Kingdom of God and where it is. You need to become like a child — be born again. Then you will be able to see the Kingdom of God.

The Bible does not tell us what happened to Nicodemus. We don't know if he one day took the risk and let God's spirit take over his life, or if over a period of time, his life gradually changed, or perhaps he didn't change at all.

Too often, for most of us, when we think of conversion, of being born again, we have in mind prodigals suddenly turning homeward or someone in deep trouble suddenly seeing the light.

Such miracles of personal renovation do occur, and sometimes they are very sudden and dramatic. But some of the most notable conversions are of another kind — church members who have never doubted Christianity, who have for years been going through the motions, and then gradually their lives begin to change, not suddenly or dramatically, but in many little ways over a period of time, then in looking back they see that their lives have been changed. They have been born again, but in little steps here and there. So they grow and continue to mature in the faith.

The good news is that it happens and continues to happen. God grant that it is happening to you. Amen.