Sunday, February 28, 1999
LEARNING FROM NICODEMUS
John 3:1-17

If you're someone who watches professional sports events on television, you've no doubt noticed that in almost every game, there is someone among the fans holding up a sign that says "John 3:16." I wonder how many television viewers know that the sign refers to a Bible verse and, if so, do they know what the verse says? If they know it is a Bible verse but don't know what it says, how many actually take their Bible off the shelf to look it up?

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

This is one of the most quoted and best-loved Bible verses. It's part of the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus, a man who came to see him secretly one night.

There's another frequently quoted Bible verse in the Nicodemus story. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." Earlier English translations say, "No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he or she is born again."

There are many ways to approach the story of Nicodemus. I've given sermons in the past on what it means to be "born again." I've also given sermons on the phrase, "God so loved the world."

In this sermon, however, we're going to focus on Nicodemus. Why did he come to see Jesus? What was he searching for, and how does that relate to our own search? Why did he come secretly at night? What did he learn from his meeting with Jesus?

First, though, I want to make a few comments about the often-quoted phrase, "born again."

According to the Gospel stories in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Jesus only used the term "born again" this one time, in his conversation with Nicodemus. The Gospel records tell us that Jesus met all kinds of individuals who were searching for new meaning and purpose in their lives, a new understanding of their religious faith, or a deeper relationship with God. Yet with them, he did not use the phrase "born again" in describing what it means to enter the Kingdom of God.

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. The Apostle Paul was unfamiliar with the term. I mention this to underscore the fact that being "born again" is one metaphor among many that have been used to describe being a part of or being able to recognize the Kingdom of God.

Now let's meet this Pharisee named Nicodemus and see what we can learn from him that will help us on our own spiritual journeys.

Jesus and his disciples had completed a long and tiring day. Night had 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 his

conversation with Jesus 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 you were part of an exclusive religious group within the Jewish faith, whose members had pledged themselves to spend their lives observing every detail of the sacred law.

Sometimes we allow the Pharisees' opposition toward Jesus and his movement to obscure the fact that in many ways, the Pharisees were the finest people, the most morally upright and respected in that society. The word "Pharisee" means "the separated one," and that describes Nicodemus 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. The Sanhedrin was responsible for safeguarding religious orthodoxy and had religious jurisdiction over every Jew in the world.

I suspect Jesus was surprised to have this pillar of the establishment come to see him in secret. Most of Jesus' time had been spent with peasants, fishermen, and other common people, those with little social standing in the community.

Nicodemus represented one of Jesus' first points 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 discover how stories such as this one from the New Testament speak to us is to determine how Nicodemus represents us.

First of all, he was a solid, respectable citizen who believed he had a solid ethical foundation. But now and then, he sensed a need for a stronger spiritual connection. Have you felt that way?
There are many intelligent, charming, decent people who most of the time feel no need to deepen their faith and commitment to God. They need no crutch. Their motto is: "God helps those who help themselves." They believe a deepened religious faith is the refuge of the poor, the weak, or the morally degraded.

They regard religious faith as a kind of ambulance, the church as an emergency room or hospital, and Jesus as a physician of last resort to whom they can turn in a crisis or old age. In the meantime, they believe 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, the best emergency room, and the best doctor available if and when they need them. Thus, they may even contribute to the upkeep of the hospital and honor it with their presence on certain occasions.

Even within the church, we find people like Nicodemus. 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. Yet at certain times, like Nicodemus, they sense within their lives a spiritual vacuum — something is missing. There is no spark, no vitality in their faith. They are looking for something more, when they are open enough to admit it.

Secondly, there are many among us who are similar to Nicodemus in the way they approach Jesus. He came to Jesus secretly. He didn't want others to know that there was an emptiness in his life.
They are also like Nicodemus in that they try to approach the discussion of spirituality in a philosophical, detached way. Nicodemus didn't want to appear too eager. In his opening statement, he used the pronoun "we" instead of "I." He didn't want to appear too personally interested. He said, "We know you are a teacher come from God." He was trying to be careful, lest he become too personally involved and have his life changed. This was in contrast to others who approached their spiritual needs openly and without hesitation. Sick people tried to touch him. Others in the crowds shouted for help in an attempt to get his attention.

There's one story about four men who brought their friend on a stretcher and, in order to get him to Jesus, had to go up on a roof and take it apart so they could let down their sick friend into the room where Jesus was.

During slavery in our history, African-American slaves were not allowed to have their own worship and were rarely allowed access to the Bible. Many had to learn to read and write secretly. So, they held clandestine religious gatherings at night, a practice that continued after emancipation. The slaves saw in Nicodemus' night visit proof that it was possible to come to Jesus even when those in power were against it.

The slaves' faith surpassed that of Nicodemus. His night visit was only exploratory, and in this story, he does not understand the invitation that is extended to him. The slaves, by contrast, understood and even embraced what God had to offer them through the ministry of Jesus.

Thirdly, many today are like Nicodemus in that they are not sure what they are searching for. The story does not tell us what Nicodemus had on his mind. All we can do is make some educated guesses based on how Jesus answered him.
He was like many people who come to counselors and know they have a problem, but they are not able to clearly communicate or focus on what the problem is. They know something is wrong or missing in their lives but are unable to pinpoint it.

Many people come to worship services like this one because they sense that something is missing in their lives but are not sure what it is. They know there is a deeper spiritual side to life, but they don't know how to find it.

What was Nicodemus looking for? Perhaps he had heard Jesus teach and heal people, and each time, he had come away persuaded that whoever or whatever else he might be, this young carpenter from Nazareth had a unique and compelling 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. Following all the rules to the letter of the law had not brought him the inner peace he sought.

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 clarify what he was looking for — that's why, in the conversation, Jesus said, "I tell you, unless one is born from above, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

At first, Nicodemus misunderstood what Jesus was talking about. He 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?"

Jesus had to explain further. He was talking about a spiritual birth so that Nicodemus could begin to see the whole world and his relationship to God in it. Notice especially that Jesus never implied that Nicodemus was outside the Kingdom of God. He said, "Unless you are born from above, you cannot see the Kingdom of God." He was saying to Nicodemus, "You are already in God's Kingdom, you are already a part of it, but you don't see it. God's love is all around you, but you are blind to it."

As I mentioned earlier, as far as we know, this is the only incident in the Bible where Jesus used the metaphor "born from above" or "born again." When other individuals came to Jesus searching for a new and deeper relationship with God, he gave different prescriptions. To some, such as his disciples, 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 come and follow me." To another person seeking spiritual direction, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan and 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 a lot of people who pride themselves on being "born-again Christians," but not very many who claim to be "Sell all you have and give to the poor" 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, he first pointed out the blocks or barriers in that person's life which had to be removed.

I saw a cartoon 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 with the virus of hate."

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

We do know this: like Nicodemus, every one of us can become more aware of the Spirit of God that is within us.

For some, it is like the prodigal 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 their faith, 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, looking back, they see that their lives have been changed. They have been born from above but in little steps here and there.

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