

17 February 2008
Lent II, Year A
Genesis 12:1-4a
Romans 4:1-5,13-17
John 3:1-17

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. (John 3:1,2)

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ignaz Semmelweis was a Hungarian doctor, who became known as the ‘savior of mothers.’¹ In the middle of the 19th century, many mothers contracted puerperal fever in hospitals while giving birth. The mortality rate was 10 to 35 percent. In 1847 while working in Austria at the Vienna General Hospital, Semmelweis discovered that when physicians washed their hands before they performed an examination, the incidence of puerperal fever dropped from about 20 to 1 percent. It would be another fifteen years before Louis Pasteur’s experiments began to prove the germ theory of disease and many more years before it achieved widespread acceptance in the medical community.

Semmelweis’ discovery about the value of handwashing ran strongly against the thinking of the medical establishment. Since he was reluctant to publish his findings, someone else wrote a couple articles on his behalf, but people weren’t prepared to hear. His findings were ignored, rejected, or ridiculed. His hospital dismissed him. In this country, too, Oliver Wendell Holmes had argued a few years earlier that doctors had spread puerperal fever from patient to patient. A senior physician dismissed Holmes’ study as “the meanderings of a sophomore.”

Human beings are more like ostriches than we care to admit. The medical establishment had buried its head deep in the sand. To accept the importance of hygiene in treating patients, doctors would have to adapt; their habit, beliefs, and values would have to evolve. Most doctors then attributed diseases to imbalances within the body, not from external contamination. Some considered washing hands every time before treating a pregnant woman to be too arduous. Another strong disincentive to listening to Semmelweis was that a doctor might have to admit that he had contributed to the illness and death of his patients. They’d lose credibility, perhaps even their privilege and position. But their refusal to give consideration to another point of view meant that thousands of women continued to die.

Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus by night? There’s a good chance he wanted his visit to be in secret, unknown to his colleagues on the Sanhedrin, the council of Jewish ruling elites, the religious establishment, those who led the opposition to Jesus.

In the scene before this, John describes Jesus cleansing the Temple. The implication of that event is that Temple sacrifices are no longer necessary. Jesus poses a serious challenge to the ruling

¹ This story from Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, The Alban Institute (2006), pp. 129-130, and from Wikipedia article on Ignaz Semmelweis.

class. They see him as a threat to their institutions, to their authority and position, to their way of life. Jesus is pushing Israel to reconsider its relationship with God in a way that would challenge the position, authority, privilege of the Sanhedrin. Perhaps unlike his colleagues, Nicodemus has enough control over his fears, a sufficient perspective on them, that he can sense that Jesus really is from God, that Jesus has authority and integrity and truth, but Nicodemus does not feel secure enough to suggest this possibility openly.

Nicodemus can't trust his friends. He has to slip by their notice to speak with Jesus, an outsider. What's this say about the community Nicodemus lived in? It doesn't seem to have much tolerance for questioning, instability, uncertainty. It prefers to close itself off and be homogeneous, instead of exchanging ideas and being open to learning and diversity. It implies oppressiveness, rigidity, brittleness.

Nicodemus' community treats differences as a problem: differences need to be minimized, avoided, or fixed. The community requires a high degree of conformity and certainty. I wonder if a similar thing has happened in the Episcopal Church where people and parishes have broken relationship because of a lack of capacity for differences of opinion.

This seems contrary to the Anglican tradition, which has historically allowed for quite a bit of latitude, has tolerated much different opinions – even contradictions, and has encouraged people to ask hard questions. We've never embraced any kind of fundamentalism, be it on the left or the right. Rather, we've had a suspicion of ideology and shibboleths.

The Rev. F.D. Maurice, a great nineteenth century Anglican theologian, made a distinction between a sect and a church.² A sect insists upon conformity in fine points of doctrine, and this explains why sects are always separating and dividing as people find new issues, new fine points, around which to organize themselves. A church, however, defines itself not by common doctrine, but by a common relationship with God. A church unites through worship, sacraments, scripture, bishops, fellowship, the Creeds. We don't always agree on what these mean, but they are the foundation of our common life in Christ.

Instead of seeing differences as a problem, we might see them simply as an inevitable part of any assembly of human beings. Any two people will almost certainly have differences, probably even irreconcilable differences. Differences become more numerous and more complex and more profound as the number of people in relationship increase. Instead of seeing this condition as a problem, we might treat it as an opportunity for learning, growing, creating. Indeed, there's little growth in life without encountering conflict.

Nicodemus' community had little capacity for differences, and so it had little space for a change of heart or mind. Differences so threaten Nicodemus' friends that they can't even have a conversation with Jesus – other than to interrogate him or to entrap him. Nicodemus bravely

² F.D. Maurice's feast day is April 1. Some of this paragraph comes from an article by the Rev. John Alexander, 'On Living Together in a Time of Theological Controversy,' published in the newsletter of St. Stephen's Church, Providence, RI.

decides to confront Jesus and tries to understand his differences with him. He wonders what being born from above is. “How can a man enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Nicodemus questions Jesus, but comes away even more confused than when he began. Jesus doesn’t give him clarity. Rather, Nicodemus’s last words are: “How can this be?” A common feature in the gospels is that the disciples are not clear about Jesus and what he’s doing. The disciples are usually confused and bungling.

John’s gospel doesn’t have a nativity story like Matthew and Luke, but we might call this story of Nicodemus a nativity scene. We might call it ‘the birth of a Christian.’³ Nicodemus certainly doesn’t walk away from this meeting confessing Christ. He’s unclear what’s what, but now he has a relationship with Jesus. He might find it an unsatisfactory relationship, but it’s an essential beginning.

Later in John’s gospel, Nicodemus appears two more times. Nicodemus’ associates, the chief priests and Pharisees, are trying to arrest Jesus, and Nicodemus decides to take a bigger risk. He defends Jesus openly. He risks alienating his friends. Nicodemus appears a final time just after Jesus has died on the cross. This time he comes to Jesus when it is still light, and he helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus’ body for burial. When most of the other disciples are fleeing from Jesus, Nicodemus is honoring his relationship with Jesus and witnessing to him.

Today’s gospel presents a marvelous irony: Nicodemus shows us what new birth is. Nicodemus comes to Jesus and wants to know what the birth from above is, what it is to be born again, and he is confused by Jesus’ answers, but Nicodemus comes to embody this birth from above.

In today’s gospel, Jesus says that we can’t precisely know when the Holy Spirit is in someone’s life, that the Holy Spirit is elusive. It’s like wind blowing in the trees. We can’t see the wind, but we can see and hear its effects. In the same way, we can see the Holy Spirit by focusing on its effects in us, not so much moment by moment, but over a period of time. That’s what happens in Nicodemus.

The work of the church, the work of this parish, is to assist the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. On earth, we’re never a completed work. We want to be able to look back and say, “I’m not entirely the same person I was three years ago, even one year ago.” If our attitudes and habits and values aren’t evolving, then the Holy Spirit isn’t blowing in our branches. But if we’re eager for learning, if we’re brave, the Holy Spirit can shape our hearts and minds.

The purpose of our life together in this parish is to transform our lives so they more fully reflect Christ. We’re here for spiritual growth. That’s why we value strong relationships, friendships built not upon similarities of opinion, but upon a shared commitment to one another and to Christ, a commitment nurtured in prayer, fellowship, exchanging ideas, working together for the Kingdom. We need one another to grow in Christ. It can’t be a solo effort. Jesus commanded us, “Love one another as I have loved you.” (Jn 13:34)

³ Scott Black Johnston, *The Lectionary Commentary: the Third Readings*, ed. Roger Van Harn, William B. Eerdmans (2001), p. 397.

It's also why we value being outward looking and being involved with the poor and forgotten. Nicodemus came to see that in Jesus, in this lowly person living on the margins of his society, was God's presence. We, too, are learning to see Christ in the other, even in those we fear, even in those who have malice toward us, even in those who offend us. Christ is in people different than us, and we want to be open to his presence, influenced by his presence, wherever it may be. The good news is that always, one way or another, he is there for us.

Heavenly Father, we pray for your Holy Spirit to be in our hearts and minds during this Lent, that together we may build and honor our relationship with Jesus in the light.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.