

The Secret Message of Jesus: “What’s Hidden from the Wise?”

John 3:1-10

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

Matthew 11:25

Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants...”

I wonder if Jesus was surprised. He hasn’t been well received by the entrenched religious hierarchy of Jerusalem. Their antipathy is so thick you’d need a knife to cut through it. The priests, the scribes, the Sadducees, the Sanhedrin – not to mention those pesky Pharisees – these are the religious elite of the holy city, and they don’t take kindly to country teachers coming in and captivating the locals. And then, without warning, here’s Nicodemus, one of the top leaders of the Great Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Jerusalem, coming under the cloak of darkness praising Jesus and attempting to engage him in conversation. I wonder what Jesus thought of this “Nick at Night” show?

Now there could be several reasons why Nick is sneaking around in the dark, trying to meet Jesus secretly. Why does he come at night? He’s a Pharisee and a leader of the Jewish people. Jesus has caused a stir among them, challenged their ideas and their power over the people. So maybe Nick is sneaking around to save face. He doesn’t want his High Court buddies to know he’s curious about Jesus. And what would the sophisticated people of Jerusalem think of a learned scholar asking questions of an untrained bumpkin from Galilee? He’s supposed to have all the answers and here he is asking questions? Unheard of.

On the other hand, perhaps Nick is being shifty or shrewd. Maybe he’s thinking he might turn Jesus by showing him in private he can’t stand toe to toe with a trained expert in a fair Bible fight. That would be merciful to Jesus and pull off a major coup with his cronies at the same time.

But I wonder if Nick hasn’t come to Jesus at night because night is when we

finally get still long enough to hear the deep questions and we keep pressed down within us. Isn't that how it happens with you? Isn't it in the darkness, when we're alone with our thoughts, when it is hardest to deny something isn't right about our lives and something has got to change? Could it just be possible that after a lifetime of study and achievement, Nicodemus realizes he doesn't have all the answers, he needs something more?

However it came to be, this really is Jesus' moment. His big opportunity! "Whoa! Here comes Nicodemus! A big shot from the Sanhedrin! Maybe he's coming in order to find out what Jesus is about." Do you know what this could mean? Maybe Nick thinks that there may be something to this Galilean rabbi, and if Jesus plays his cards right and impresses Nick, he's a guy who could stand up for him with all the other religious leaders. I mean, Nick could make all the difference in the world for Jesus. He could level the hills and fill in the valleys of the road Jesus travels. Instead of being perceived as an outsider, Jesus could gain a little respect. But, what a shame! Jesus seems intent on being difficult and inscrutable. At one point, he even seems to be ridiculing Nicodemus.

Nick begins in sort of a fawning, bootlicking way: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." But before Nick even gets to his first question, Jesus interrupts. He cuts off the flattery and cuts right to the chase. He nails Nick right between the eyes with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth old Nick needs to hear: "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the dominion of God without being born from above." He's saying, "Nick. It doesn't come from your precious scrolls, or from tradition or the teaching heard in the Temple. It doesn't come from studying biology, philosophy or theology. It doesn't come from doing right or being righteous. It doesn't come from your friends, your parents, your laptop or your cell phone. It comes from *above* – from God!"

But old Nick – God love him – just can't see it. He doesn't get it. The word "above" in "born from above" also means "again." And that's how Nick hears it. Jesus is telling him he must start all over again with God. But Nicodemus is a literalist. Nick takes Jesus literally, and if you always take the Word of God literally, you will probably miss the point. His bushy eyebrows come together in a "uni-brow": "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" It's nonsense. It doesn't fit his view of reality, so he can't understand it. Education, experience, age can do that to you – set you up for failure, make you proud, make you think you know everything when you really only know a little and not all of that is true. A lot of the time, before you can learn something new, you have to let go of what you think you know and especially your need to be the one who knows.

Jesus is patient. A good teacher, he tries another metaphor. He tells Nick he

needs to be born of the Spirit. Now in both Hebrew and Greek, the word for “Spirit” and “breath” and “wind” are all one word: ruach in Hebrew and pneuma in Greek. Jesus tells Nick, “Do you feel the ruach! Can you sense the pneuma! The wind blows where it wants and you can’t control it. It comes from somewhere outside of you. But you see what it does. That’s how it is when you’re born of the Spirit. It’s not something you can program or predict! Feel the pneuma blow through your life. Breathe it in. Give yourself to it. Let God’s Spirit give you fullness of life.”

“How can these things be?” Nicodemus complains. And that’s when Jesus says something that stings: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and you do not understand these things?” Poor Nick. Those scribal glasses he wears, prescribed by the religion of his ancestors and his parents and his teachers and his culture, say God has handed down the rules, the law, and you better follow them or you are going to get zapped. They say God will condemn you for not obeying perfectly. They say religion is all about getting saved from what God will do to you. And Jesus is saying, “You’re so far off the track, Nick, that you’ve got to go back to the beginning and start all over again.”

What’s most amazing to me about this story – and I hope you see it – is that Jesus doesn’t make this emphasis on being “born from above” with some degenerate, or prostitute, or “shelter person,” or demon-possessed mass-murderer. He tells this to the most religious guy around, the most God-fearing, law-abiding, Bible-totin’, scripture-quotin’, righteous Pharisee you could find. He tells him: “You need to start over. Nicodemus, you need to be born from above!”

Now, in light of this confusing exchange, you and I need to ask “WHY?” I’ve got to tell you, once again I see that Jesus is an enormous mystery to me. Why is he so cryptic? Why is he so difficult? When he has a member of the Sanhedrin come to him privately, ready to eat out of his hand, why does he hang him out to twist in the pneuma?

What does this say to you and me? Because, in all honesty, there are times in which all of us – like Nicodemus – have felt trapped in the darkness. We’ve awakened in the night and wondered what our lives are all about. We’ve done all the right things, followed the rules, been as good as we know how, but we awaken, and our questions, our doubts, start bubbling up and we, too, want to go to Jesus and talk it out. And maybe we do start talking to Jesus, right there in the dark.

But just imagine that you did suddenly get the “night crawlers” and you were the one who felt driven to Jesus, and he started to speak to you as he did to Nicodemus. You wouldn’t feel so good. You want straight talk, but Jesus starts asking you the questions. And the more he asks, the less you understand, the less you know. Your head starts spinning. And maybe, just maybe, that’s the beginning of wisdom – the recognition that you do not really know anything. And it’s clear

that he does.

But if his message is so important, why does he risk being misunderstood – or not understood at all? Why doesn't he just speak plainly?

I think the reason is that it cannot be spoken any other way. Although you may not like how he does it, Jesus is trying to get you and me to see something. He's not trying to rub our noses in our ignorance. He's just working us hard to get us to see something that just cannot be described in a technically descriptive way.

So the words and parables of Jesus are like a pointer for us. Jesus is like that hand that is pointing to the sun above – but he does not want us ever to mistake his hand for that amazingly brilliant ball of nuclear fires around which our world orbits. So, what does Jesus do? He speaks in parables and metaphorical language. All through the gospels, people complain about it. “Why does he speak in parables?” Sisters and brothers, he's not trying to be difficult. It's his only option. For how do you describe that which is outside of space and time to creatures who are trapped within space and time? You stretch the boundaries of language no matter what you do. And in doing this, he's teaching us a new way of seeing our lives and our world. In the words of Matthew, Mark and Luke, this new reality is called the Kingdom – or Reign – of God. John uses the idea of “fullness of life” or “real life.”

Can I describe this to you in a simple sentence or two? No more than could Jesus. So let's all give up our need to be the one who knows and simply admit there's more to what Jesus than what we've understood. If you and I haven't seen what Jesus is pointing to, then let's not claim knowledge or wisdom we do not have. Let's simply crane our necks for a while. As he wanted Nicodemus to do, let's try to start over with God. Let's open our eyes and try to see what it is that Jesus would have us see. In the weeks to come, we're going to try to lift the veil and point with Jesus to the reality of God that's all around us.

Do you remember the book called *The Education of Little Tree*? It is a profoundly spiritual story of Native American life and philosophy and speaks of the reality to which Jesus pointed. A five-year old Indian boy, Little Tree, is raised by his grandparents. At one point in the book, Little Tree remembers one of the important things his grandmother has taught him.

He says, “Granma said everybody has two minds. One of the minds has to do with the necessities for body living. You had to use it to figure how to get shelter and eating and such for the body. She said we had to have that mind so as we could carry on. But she said we had another mind that had nothing at all to do with such. She said it was the Spirit Mind.

“Grandma said if you used the body-living mind to think greedy or mean; if you was always cuttin' at folks with it and figuring how to material profit off'n them, then you would shrink up your spirit-mind to size no bigger'n a hickor' nut.

“That’s how you become dead people. Grandma said you could easy spot dead people. She said dead people when they looked at other people they saw nothing but bad. Granma said they were dead people walking around.

“Granma said that the spirit mind was like any other muscle. If you used it it got bigger and stronger. She said the only way it could get that way was using it to understand, but you couldn’t open the door to it until you quit being greedy and such with your body mind. Then understanding commenced to take up, and the more you tried to understand, the bigger it got.”

The bread and wine of communion this day is a foretaste of that “true world” Jesus wants us to see. It frees us, as Little Tree would say, from our body mind so that we might be guided by our Spirit mind – so we might begin to see the Kingdom of God all around us. It delivers us from our smaller self, from our need to cut up each other into little pieces, and it makes us God’s blessing once again.

We enter into our covenant with God once again, when receive this bread and wine, we remember that there is so much more to this world than what we’ve allowed ourselves to see. For this bread, this wine, is a sacrament – a sign of that holiness that we glimpse as through a glass, darkly, as when, like Nicodemus, we wake in the dead of night.