

Our Gospel today covers one of the most important interviews ever recorded. Its details document an encounter between our Lord and Nicodemus, who was hungry to learn essential truths concerning the Kingdom of God.

The encounter, in some ways, reminds me of an unforgettable conversation that I had with my daughter, Emily, when I had just graduated from seminary at 42 years of age. My daughter, who was eight years old at the time, asked me after the graduation ceremony, “Daddy, now that you have graduated, what are you going to do when you grow up?”

I had to laugh because her comments reflected in a childlike way something of the “transitional” midlife crisis I happened to be going through. I had a whole new and unknown world of adventure ahead, but it was not without risk. The fear of the unknown caused me to do some self-reflection. It even caused me to raise fundamental questions about life. Questions like: Who am I? What have I done with my life? Where do I want to go, and what do I want to be? Are my values and principles upon which I have built my life something that needs to be reconsidered or adjusted? I had spent three years in an ivory tower of intellectual and theological pursuits, but now I had to face the real world.

As I reflect upon this time, I can’t help but wonder if Nicodemus felt something of the same thing when he came to Jesus at night. There was something about Jesus’ life and ministry that pointed to something new and exciting, which made his own life, in comparison, seem old and stuffy. Here was a man trapped somehow by his own success. He has made it to the top of his world as a “leader of the Jews.” He has reached the pinnacle of eminence as a member of the Great Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the land. Yet, having reached this lofty status, he must have found his heart still unsatisfied. His current beliefs had made him upstanding, responsible, and respectable, but not new. I can almost

hear him asking himself, “Is this all there is? Isn’t there something more that the law, which I have diligently studied all my life, points to?

Most of the time, the Gospels depict antagonistic exchanges between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. But this exchange is different. Nicodemus is honestly curious.

If you have ever seen the contemporary “Chosen” series that covers the life of Christ, you can’t help but notice the marvelous way that they develop Nicodemus’ character. He is often pictured listening to Jesus with a perplexed, guilty look. Yet, his conviction compels him to know more. So he comes to Jesus at night and begins the conversation with this statement: **“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”**¹ These opening words of his conversation with Jesus revealed something of his hunger and interest to know more, despite his social status and religious training.

His interest reminds me of a story about a young man who had problems at home, so he moved in with a Christian family and stayed for several weeks. He attended a couple of confirmation classes at their church, and these classes provoked many questions within him. So one day, he asked if he could help run the youth group at church. The priest replied, “Yes, when I see that you know what it means to be a Christian.” To this, the young man responded, **“That’s easy; it means that you have to give up doing a lot of stuff.”**

I wonder if this isn’t the kind of legalistic assumption that Nicodemus may have had, for there were undoubtedly a lot of restrictions that “a teacher of the law” like Nicodemus was well aware of. But no matter how diligently we observed them, those rules can never make a person new. So Jesus, knowing how futile it is to achieve entrance into the kingdom of God through legalism or outward conformity to the law, says, **“What I’m about to tell you is true. No one**

¹ John 3:2

*can see God's kingdom unless they are born again.*² The Greek term for being 'born again' means "from above, from heaven and by implication, anew."³ So Jesus is talking about a new beginning that has its source in the Spirit of God, making a person new from the inside out, not from the outside in.

Jesus explains this spiritual reality by declaring, "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Therefore, you should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'*"⁴ "*The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*"⁵

Then Nicodemus asks again, "*How can this be?*"⁶ or, as another Bible translation puts it, "*How can things like this happen?*"⁷ His question reveals the limitations of God's law to make a person new. Salvation doesn't come "by giving up a bunch of stuff," as that young man who wanted to lead the youth group assumed.

The Apostle Paul alludes to this in our New Testament lesson from Romans when he asks, "What did Abraham discover that we need to know and learn from?"⁸ Paul answers that question by using a quote from Genesis, "*Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.*"⁹ Paul's point is that Abraham stood in the right before God by believing, not by doing, as the above quotation proves.

Therefore, instead of using the law to establish one's own righteousness, he had to accept that even though "all have sinned and had come short of the glory of God,"¹⁰ God has provided a way for us to

² John 3:3

³ NIV note: the Greek is purposely ambiguous and can mean both *again* and *from above*; also verse 7

⁴ John 3:6-7

⁵ John 3:8

⁶ John 3:9

⁷ John 3:9 Amplified Bible

⁸ Romans 4:1 paraphrased

⁹ Genesis 15:6 quotes by the Apostle Paul in Romans 4:3

¹⁰ Romans 3:23

experience his redemption and forgiveness through his sacrificial love. For Abraham, his life and walk of faith meant leaving all that was secure and familiar, as he obeyed God's *call "to go out to a place that he would later receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going."*¹¹ In reality, this meant rethinking everything he had once thought was important.

Therefore, today's Gospel challenges us to rethink how this life of faith impacts us. Jesus said, *"If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he, who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."*¹² These earthly and heavenly realities become real to us as we begin to accept what Jesus says about them.

Then, using Israel's grumbling and complaining in the desert that resulted in them being bitten by poisonous snakes, and the only remedy was to pin one of the snakes on a pole and lift it up for the people to see. That snake was a picture of the curse Jesus took upon himself for the world's salvation as he hung upon the cross. *"For God made him who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God."*¹³

Therefore when Jesus told Nicodemus, *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life,"*¹⁴ he was talking about building his life on:

- The Greatest Love – for God so loved the world.
- The Greatest Gift at the Greatest Cost – For God gave His One and Only Son.

¹¹ Hebrews 11:8-9

¹² John 3:12-15

¹³ 2 Corinthians 5:21

¹⁴ John 3:16

- The Greatest Result – that whoever believes in Him shall not perish.
- The Greatest life – for God’s unending life is promised to those who believe.

Conclusion:

All we have to do is accept it. The love is free. The gift is free because it was paid for at a great price. ***“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”***¹⁵ Amen.

¹⁵ John 3:17