

**8:30am , 9:16am & 11:00am Worship**

May 30, 2010

Title: Becoming Like Jesus

**Rev. Donald W. Hackett, D.Min.**

Text: John 3:1-4

First Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, PA

*The Text: John 3:1-4*    **Jesus Teaches Nicodemus**

*Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "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." In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. **"Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"***

*Introduction*

**Today we are wrapping up our year-long study** on the biblical journeys of faith. Starting with Abraham in Genesis, we have meandered our way through the Old and New Testaments learning from the lives of men and women who sought to be worshippers of God. We studied **Abraham, Noah, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, David, Esther, Elijah, and Daniel** in the Old Testament. In the New Testament we walked with **Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, the Magi, John the Baptist, Andrew, Stephen, Mary Magdalene, Peter**, the disciples walking to **Emmaus, Paul, Timothy**, and now **Nicodemus**. We also looked at types of prayer through the season of Lent. Wow. It has been quite a journey! So why end with Nicodemus? Who was he? What about his journey of faith can help ours today?

*Nicodemus – A Man on a Journey of Faith*

**Who was Nicodemus?** The text tells us that he was man of great learning and political power. He was a Pharisees and a member of the Jewish ruling council.

- Pharisees were known for their devotion to God and commitment to giving a tenth of all their earned to God.
- They lived their lives in strict obedience to the Law.
- They were concerned that their faith was being lost, swallowed up by all the pagan influences in their multi-cultural world.

As a member of the Jewish ruling council, Nicodemus joined 70 other high ranking men in the Sanhedrin who were responsible for the spiritual and community life for the Jews living in Judah and in Galilee. He was a member in an elite religious, intellectual, and political community. Though a member, Nicodemus did not really belong with them. Nicodemus was on a search.

*Belong to Jesus*

**Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night.** He was curious about Jesus, but did not want to be identified with him yet. Nicodemus greets Jesus with respect calling him “Rabbi” (or master, teacher) and acknowledges his healing power that must come from God alone. Eugene Peterson in the Message translation says it this way: “Rabbi, we all know you’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren’t in on it.” Jesus does not seem to be flattered by this man’s visit or his praise. Jesus addresses the main issue head-on. Jesus said, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: **Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to God’s kingdom.**”

**From there things get confusing for Nicodemus.** What does Jesus mean? Do I have to start all over? I have to go back and be born by my mother again? Jesus then patiently explains to Nicodemus that there is another kind of birth that he and all people need...a spiritual birth that comes from the Spirit of God. Jesus came to die to pay the price for our rebellion against God. Once the price is paid (Jesus dying on the cross), healing and life can come to all who trust in Christ.

**Jesus gives Nicodemus an illustration of this from the life of Moses.** In the book of Numbers, chapter 21, there is that account of how the Israelites were rebelling again against God. The text says: “*They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. The LORD said to Moses, “**Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.**” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.*”

**So in explaining his purpose to Nicodemus, Jesus says:** “In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and **everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.** (John 3:15, the Message)”

*So close, yet so far away*

**Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to belong to him.** Jesus calls Nicodemus away from trusting his own power, his own years of learning. Jesus invites Nicodemus to trust in, to depend upon Jesus to give him all he needs. In leading the people of Israel, Nicodemus needed Jesus. Jesus would give him the wisdom and power to serve in the ways he was

designed to serve and lead. Nicodemus left that night with much to think about. Would he belong to Jesus?

*Belong. Behave. Believe.*

**Nicodemus is not the only person who needs to belong to Jesus. We all need a place to belong.** We all need a place where we can drop our bags and feel relaxed. We need a safe place. We need a group of people who know our name and are glad to see us. We need a place where we are loved and not judged. A place our needs are met and we are able to meet the needs of others in caring community. We need somewhere where we belong. The place I felt always welcomed was my Aunt Peg and Uncle Dick's house. They were my home away from home. As my dad's career in the military took us all over the world, we often stopped and stayed with Peg and Dick in Western Pennsylvania. Even as a young man and a middle-aged husband and father, we returned to their home. Why? We belonged.

**Where have been safe places for you?** In the house of your childhood? In your home now? At a friend's house or another relative? In the church? In a class or Bible Study? We need to be with people are on this faith journey with us. We need to walk through life with people who will keep us focused on what is important and help shape our lives. As I continued in life, Peg and Dick quietly shaped my life. Our many conversations around the kitchen table, their humble lives of service, and gracious hospitality slowly changed me. I felt I belonged in their home. Slowly I began to behave like them. And one day I realized that I wanted to be like Peg and Dick when I grew up. **Belong. Behave. Believe. That is how disciples are made these days.** Belong. Behave. Believe. *Where are you in the process of becoming an intentional follower of Jesus?*

**You, like Nicodemus, may be full of questions.** What is God really like? Is Jesus really who he said he was? Can the Holy Spirit of God actually live in my life and do holy work in me? To this Jesus says, come and see. Come and taste and determine for yourself if it is good. Nicodemus must have continued to listen to Jesus and thought deeply about what he saw and heard. In John 7, the Sanhedrin was engaged in a hot discussion about how to get rid of Jesus, and it records this:

*"<sup>50</sup>Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, <sup>51</sup>"Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" <sup>52</sup>They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee."*

**Somewhere between John 3 and John 7 Nicodemus joined the tribe of Jesus.** He begins to stand up for Jesus. His commitment was not with elite murderers, he belonged to Jesus. This becomes fully evident as Nicodemus chooses to join Joseph of Arimathea in caring for the body of Jesus after his crucifixion. Surely, that action would cost Nicodemus dearly. But it did not matter...he belonged to Jesus.

**To help you think practically about how to deepen in your life in Christ,** we have included some options in your bulletin. Let's look at these together and be praying which ones might have you name on them this summer:

### **1. Inspiring Worship**

- Drive in silence and invite God to speak to you
- Attend public worship every week and invite someone to come with you
- Create a daily time to be quiet before God
- Volunteer to greet, work with children or youth, usher, or clean up at church events
- Practice thanks every hour and at the end of the day

### **2. Caring Community**

- Wear a name tag and introduce yourself to someone new each week
- Bring a treat for hospitality to worship
- Invite a new person to lunch or dinner
- Pray for needs as you hear about them
- Be trained to be a Marriage Mentor, Healing Prayer partner, or Stephen Minister
- Complete a living will (*Five Wishes*)
- Call or visit someone in need

### **3. Intentional Spiritual Formation**

- Talk weekly with a spiritual friend about goals
- Read a Psalm every morning
- Read one book to deepen your faith
- Participate in a class/small group on Sunday Morning or during the week
- Read a half of chapter from the book of Ephesians every day and make notes in your Bible
- Journal daily your life reflections to God

### **4. Need-based Serving**

Pray for and serve a neighbor or co-worker each week

- Serve at Water Street, Habitat for Humanity, Brightside Opportunity Center, or cleaning up Musser Park.
- Give to a person or country in need
- Increase your giving to the church
- Give regularly and quietly to special needs
- Provide for the continuing work of God in your will/planned gift

**Check out our events and resources**  
**[www.fpcLIVE.org](http://www.fpcLIVE.org) or call us at 717.394.6854**