



**North Shore  
Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

## ***“From Truth to Trust”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*John 3: 1-17*

*March 1, 2026*

How often have any of you asked your spouse about the cost of some new purchase that arrived at home, only to have them reply, ‘It was on sale!’ How many of you have asked another how you look in an outfit, only to hear, ‘You always look great!’ How many times do we ask our teenagers where they were, only to have them respond, ‘I was out!’ Some humorous, some annoying, some outright frustrating, our lives are filled with those moments in which we ask one question, only to receive an entirely different answer. Spend 5 minutes watching any politician being interviewed by a reporter and that politician will provide the same 2 or 3 answers in a dozen different ways, and more often than not, none of them will have anything to do with the actual question they were asked. Sometimes it’s obfuscation, sometimes it’s disinterest, sometimes it’s the blinders of the respondent unable to see beyond what they wanted to say in the moment. In all corners of life, however, we are constantly encountering those moments in which the answer we get seems to have little to do with the question we asked. And that was the experience of Nicodemus as he approached Jesus that night.

John tells us, in these familiar words of the third chapter of his gospel, that Nicodemus was a Pharisee who approached Jesus at night. There’s some interesting symbolism in that, as light and darkness – night and day – play such a deep role in John’s gospel. As a Pharisee, it’s likely that Nicodemus was approaching Jesus at night out of fear of being discovered, misunderstood, or otherwise condemned by his peers. The Pharisees were no friends to Jesus, and Nicodemus would not have wanted to risk his position and place in society by being seen as somehow befriending – or worse even learning from – Jesus. The darkness of night gives Nicodemus some cover for this moment, but the darkness of his understanding (or more to the point his lack thereof) is even more critical to what is about to unfold.

‘Rabbi,’ Nicodemus says, ‘we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.’ Now, admittedly, that’s not a question per se. But still, Jesus’ response seems to be a complete non-sequitur. To this comment about God’s presence in the life and ministry of Jesus – from a man who is part of the established opposition – Jesus replies, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’ What?!?

You can almost picture the dumbfounded look on Nicodemus’ face in that moment. He sneaks over to Jesus in the cover of night – risking so much to even have this conversation – he owns

with Jesus the acknowledgment that something is going on that is beyond mere human capacities – and Jesus responds with some sort of gibberish about a person being born a second time. What is Nicodemus supposed to do with that? The Pharisees were the teachers of the Law. They were leaders in society and in the temple, they were very legalistic in their understanding of the Law and very rigid in their adherence to it. Pharisees were thinkers. These were men that applied logic and reason to what it means to live in faith, and Nicodemus was just told that a person has to be born a second time in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It's not a surprise that there's some confusion here.

Nicodemus wants to understand, so he asks what likely felt to be the most absurd question he'd ever asked. The literal application of Jesus' statement is so ridiculous that Nicodemus likely can't even believe the words coming out of his mouth, but he's lost. His logic and reason are failing to even remotely grasp what Jesus is talking about here. Jesus continues further, and Nicodemus still doesn't get it. 'How can this be?' Nicodemus asks. That, I want to suggest, is where we begin to get to the heart of this particular moment between Jesus and Nicodemus. 'You are Israel's teacher,' Jesus says, 'and even you don't understand.' That's where Jesus continues on in verse 11 of John 3...

*Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”*

*16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

There is no question that there are some grand theological principals that emerge in this discourse between Nicodemus and Jesus. Many of us are quite familiar with those words of John 3:16, and we've seen more than a few of those placards being held up in the stands beyond the end zone of many a football game over the years. There's also some question, and even consternation, that begins to emerge, especially as you go a bit further into the third chapter. In the verses that follow, Jesus shifts into questions of condemnation, living in the light, and all sorts of things that tweak us just a bit as we try to figure out what all of it means. We did our fair share of that twisting this past Wednesday at our Bible Discussion on this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. What I want us to focus on for today, however, is less about the grand theology and more about this moment in which Jesus gives Nicodemus answers to questions Nicodemus never asked.

As Nicodemus begins the conversation centered on the presence of God in the life and ministry of Jesus, Jesus responds with this vague notion of being born again (or anew, or above – depending on the translation). As Nicodemus struggles to understand, Jesus chastises him. 'You are Israel's teacher, and still you don't get it?' Nicodemus struggles, and Jesus presses on, 'You don't even understand the earthly side of things, how will you grasp the heavenly ones?' There's

this odd dynamic in which Jesus runs off into this tangent of being born anew, of the Spirit moving like the wind, of not knowing what's going on, and Nicodemus must be standing there dumfounded like someone who asked about the weather, only to receive a response about the rising cost of pork bellies in Ireland. It all seems a bit strange. I'm certain that Nicodemus was caught off guard to say the least – and I can understand why. I am also convinced, however, that when we pierce through the both the grand theological principles and the confusing conversational minutia, what we find is Jesus trying to help Nicodemus claim a fundamental shift in how he approaches his relationship with faith and with God.

Remember, Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the darkness of night, and that darkness is not only a reflection of the sociopolitical cloud that surrounds the conversation, but points us back to the shadows that blur Nicodemus' very relationship with God. A Pharisee – a teacher of the Law – Nicodemus comes to Jesus with knowledge. Think of those very words he speaks. 'We know...' Nicodemus says. 'We know that you are teacher who has come from God.' That comment – that very approach to this conversation – is what Jesus is responding to with all of those seemingly random responses that follow. 'You must be born from above.' Jesus says. 'This isn't about understanding earthly things,' he says. 'You're not always going to understand!'

The word translated throughout this chapter as 'believe' is a word that we see a number of times in John. Last year, during Lent, we looked at those words in John 14 when Jesus says to the disciples, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid. Trust in God. Trust also in me?' That's the same word. That word sometimes translated as 'trust' is the same word translated here in John 3 as 'believe.' This notion of believing that Jesus is talking about with Nicodemus is not a mental exercise, it's faithful act of entrusting one's self to God – and that's exactly the error to which Jesus is pointing in Nicodemus' faith. Nicodemus comes to Jesus with knowledge... with understanding... with insight. A man of legalistic and logical mental acuity, Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a pronouncement of what is known – of what is truth. Jesus responds that living into this new birth that we know in God is not about what is known, but about the faith that we hold. Living into the new birth that is our gift from God is not about truth, it's about trust.

I've railed plenty and often about the theological notion that one can somehow grasp the truth of God and seek to bequeath it upon the others around them. That remains true – and remains a point of tremendous contention for yours truly. For today, however, I want us to reflect on when and how we might be succumbing to the temptation of Nicodemus. The simple reality is that we want to know the truth of God. We want to claim the truth of God. We want to reach that point of understanding and being able to articulate what we know about God, and more often than not, as we march down those paths in pursuit of claiming the truths of our faith, it can quickly begin to feel like the answers we receive don't have much of anything to do with the questions we ask. And, often, they don't. Because Jesus isn't interested in our knowledge. Jesus isn't interested in the facts we recite. Jesus isn't interested in the truths we deceive ourselves into claiming as divine. Jesus is interested in our faith, our searching, and our sometimes blind trust in him. Whether we realize it or not – whether we battle it or not – every time we seek to bring our truth to Jesus, he will seek instead, as he did with Nicodemus, to deepen our trust in him.