

“Wanting to Want to Love You”
John 2:23-3:10
First Sunday after the Epiphany
January 13, 2008

*“Oh God, I don’t love you, I don’t even want to love you, but I want to want to love you.
Amen.” (St. Teresa of Avila, 1515-1582)*

Several months ago several of us started a Wednesday night study of a book entitled “Beginnings.” In its first chapter we read of a scene from the movie “City Slickers.”¹ Great movie, remember? Billy Crystal plays Mitch Robbins, a New York City baby boomer that is in the throes of a mid-life crisis. At one point he wonders, “Have you ever reached a point in your life when you say to yourself, ‘This is the best I’m ever going to look, the best I’m ever going to feel, the best I’m ever going to do—and it ain’t that good?’” Mitch decides that taking a vacation out west and participating in a cattle drive with his friends might be the best way to snap out of his funk. Once at the ranch they meet Curly, an old grizzled trail boss played by the late Jack Palance. At one point Curly asks: “Do you know what the secret of life is?”

“No. What?” Mitch asks.

Curly holds up one finger and says, “This.”

“Your finger?” comes the puzzled reply.

The old trail boss responds by saying, “One thing, just one thing. You stick to that and everything else don’t mean ____.”

“That’s great.” Mitch says, “But what’s the one thing?”

And that’s when Curly looks at him, winks and says, “That’s what you’ve got to figure out.”

For the next couple of weeks, I want us to try and figure out that “one thing.” You don’t have to be a baby boomer in the middle of a mid-life crisis to know that something is missing in your life. Something just doesn’t feel right. So many of you feel as if there just has to be something more than what you are experiencing right now. I want us to spend some time and try to discover what that something is. More than likely it is not a sports car, a trophy wife or sexy new husband, a corner office, a Nintendo Wii, or various

¹ Andy Langford and Mark Ralls, Beginnings, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2003, p. 13

nips, tucks, and enhancements by the local plastic surgeon. So what is it? Well, that is what we need to discover. And I want to start our search by discussing some of the more interesting characters in the Bible, those that seemed to be looking for that one thing as well. Zacchaeus, the woman caught in adultery, the apostle who was once called Saul, and the fellow we will look at today, the man known as Nicodemus.

His, of course, is a well-known story. Unfortunately, it is a story that carries a whole lot of baggage. As you heard, it contains those well-known words “born again,” a phrase that has been so corrupted of late that we have forgotten much of its original meaning. While we will need to talk about it in a bit, let’s focus for the moment upon the man himself. Nicodemus was someone who, according to John’s gospel, approached Jesus late one night. Apparently he had witnessed some of the wondrous things that Jesus had been doing around and about Jerusalem and sensed that there must be something more to this man from Galilee. He understood that whatever Jesus was doing could not be done without God working in and through his life. Nicodemus was more than impressed. It seems to me that he not only wanted to see what big thing Jesus would do next, but also perhaps even see if Jesus was that “something more” for which everyone looks at one time or another. But something held him back. Something kept him from taking that next step. Something did not allow him to do what he knew was right. And whether we want to admit it or not, I believe that something is something that every one of us understands all too well. Let me show you what I mean.

John tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisees. The Pharisees, of course, were the professional clerics of New Testament Palestine. They were those who led the weekly services at the synagogue, interpreted the various laws of Moses, and tried to keep the people true to the faith that so many outside forces were trying to undo. While the New Testament paints them in a rather unflattering light, historically speaking they performed a great service for the Jewish people. Now Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee, but John tells us that he was also a leader of the Pharisees. He had risen through their ranks and held a seat on the Sanhedrin, the highest religious council in the land. It had the final say on all matters of faith and practice. It wielded tremendous clout and influence. The

Sanhedrin was a respected institution, and those who sat on it—like Nicodemus—had to know their biblical and theological stuff. And it is with all this in mind that we see this respected, influential, well-educated Pharisee coming to Jesus to search for that which was missing in his life. He said, “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs apart from the presence of God.” Now I am not quite sure what he wanted Jesus to say after that. I really don’t know if he expected a pat on the back or a compliment for being so perceptive. What I do know, however, is that he was caught completely off guard with what came next. Jesus looked at him and said, “*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being **anohen**.*”

Now I did not use that word from the original text just to impress you—as if I was ever able to impress you by anything I say—but to remind you that with that word Jesus used a very familiar pun. The Greek word “anohen” can be understood in two different ways: as “born again” or “born from above.” Either way one chooses, the phrase is a symbolic way of describing what happens when a person undergoes some kind of radical God-inspired change. It was not a concept that would have been foreign to Nicodemus. When people converted to the Jewish faith the rabbis said, “A proselyte who embraces Judaism is like a newborn child.”² They also said that the change that person experienced was so radical that any of his or her past sins were erased, for now he or she was a completely new person. Nicodemus, this leader of the Pharisees, was well versed in the understanding of the scriptures. As a member of the Sanhedrin, he had spent his entire life studying the various nuances of his faith. He was smart enough to know what Jesus was saying. Yet instead of taking Jesus’ words symbolically, the way he knew they were intended, he deliberately chose to be literal. He asked, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

That is not so much dumb as it is evasive. Remember now, Nicodemus was impressed by Jesus because of all the wondrous things he had been doing. Miracles, signs, or whatever it is you want to call them, Nicodemus knew that God was with this

² William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Vol. 1 (Revised Edition), Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975, p. 126

carpenter from Nazareth. More than likely, he even wanted to hang around him to see what he would do next. But Jesus told him that was not enough. Knowing what Jesus was able to do or watching him perform some neat trick was no basis for discovering what was missing in his life. If he truly wanted to follow him, it would take a whole lot more than just hanging around. It would take change. It would take a complete rebirth. It would take leaving his old ways behind and following Jesus whole-heartedly. And based simply on what the history of his own faith tradition tells us, I know Nicodemus knew that. He knew exactly what it took to lead a new and abundant life. But he couldn't or wouldn't—at least at that point in his life. He would be giving up too much if he did. That is probably why he came to Jesus at night. The Sanhedrin already had it out for Jesus. They did not like the idea that some uneducated carpenter was telling the people how God was calling them to live their lives. So despite his desperate search, despite his quest for meaning in his life, Nicodemus feared being seen with Jesus in the bright light of day. After all, everything he had worked for was on the line. The paparazzi of the day would have had a field day if they ever caught him. Can't you just see the headlines in the supermarket tabloids? "Nick at Night," "Carpenter Hammers Leader," or my favorite, "There's No Womb for Nicodemus." (Oh, like you didn't know that was coming!)

In "Beginnings," the book our Wednesday night group was studying, there is an interesting paragraph that seems to sum it up nicely. It goes like this:

For a brief period near the end of his life, Albert Camus, the great philosopher—assumed to be an atheist—attended a small Methodist church in France. In conversations with his pastor, Camus had this to say about his own search: "This man Nicodemus...He is seeking something he does not have. I feel right at home with Nicodemus, because I too am uncertain about this whole matter of Christianity...The reason I have been coming to this church is because I am seeking. I'm almost on a pilgrimage—seeking something to fill the void I am experiencing...I am searching for something that the world is not giving me."³

³ Langford, op cit, p. 16

Do Camus' words strike a familiar chord with you? Can you see how Nicodemus is our brother? The old Pharisee's pilgrimage could be that of any one of us. He was drawn to Jesus, you see. He had a fairly good inkling that this man from Nazareth was from God. He understood that what Jesus offered just might be that "something more" that was missing from his life. I think he even listened to Jesus' words and wondered what it would be like if he really could start all over again. But while attracted to him, while knowing deep down inside that Jesus was probably right, he couldn't or wouldn't make that one last step. He couldn't or wouldn't let himself be changed.

It is the same with you and me, isn't it? We are drawn to Jesus. We have always heard that there is something very special about him. We understand that what he offers just might be that which is missing in our lives, perhaps even that "one thing" that old Curly told us that we all had to figure out. We have even considered that we really ought to give ourselves to Christ. Why, we wouldn't give up our Sunday morning and sit in this building if we didn't at least sense that to be the case. But just like Nicodemus, we can't or won't make that last step. We can't or won't let our lives be changed. Why? Perhaps it is because we know that if we did our reputation would suffer. We know how it is at the office. We know what our friends would say. Perhaps it is because our lifestyle would suffer. We know how Jesus asked Peter and John to leave everything behind and follow. We know how much we like the stuff we believe is so vital for our lives. Or perhaps it is because if we did do what he asked everything about ourselves would truly have to change. Our basic understanding of who we are would have to be completely different. So even though we know we need to change, we like how comfortable we are with the way things are. Or are we? We know that something is missing. We know that there has to be more to life than what our world has to offer. We have been searching for it most of our lives. And like Nicodemus, we pretty much know what it's going to take to find that one thing—we've known it for the longest time. We don't have to go on some Old West cattle drive or some other offbeat midlife quest to find it. It has been right here in front of us all along. So what is keeping us, what is keeping you, from doing what we know we need to do?

Do you remember Augustine? Born in the 4th century, he was one of those who came into this world passionately searching for that something that was missing in his life. Someone once wrote of that search, his “clamorous body and a clamorous mind both demanded satisfaction.”⁴ His search for the women to satisfy his body and the truth to satisfy his mind is legendary. Yet as you might expect a preacher to say, neither brought him the relief he sought. Finally, through a series of events that would take too long to retell, he finally found himself drawn to Jesus Christ. At the age of 33 he gave himself fully to the Lord. Ten years later he was a bishop of the church, and—outside of St. Paul—the single most influential voice the Christian faith has ever known. And it was at that time that he wrote his “Confessions,” and perhaps that one line that not only seemed to sum up his life so completely, but our lives as well: “For You have made us for Yourself and our hearts are restless till they rest in you.”⁵

Does that describe your search? Is your heart trying to figure out that one thing? Do you already know where it can find the rest for which it so longs? It seems that perhaps Nicodemus finally found it. He is mentioned only two more times in John’s gospel. In the 7th chapter, when the tide begins to turn against Jesus, the rest of the Sanhedrin begin to question the temple guards’ failure to arrest him. When Nicodemus raises a point of law, seemingly offering up a defense of Jesus, the members of the Sanhedrin respond by turning upon him. Then, in the 19th chapter, Nicodemus goes with Joseph of Arimathea to ask Pilate for the crucified body of Jesus. After taking it down from the cross and laying it in the tomb, Nicodemus brought 100 pound of myrrh and aloe to eventually prepare the body for burial. That has led some to believe that Nicodemus finally did what he always knew was right, that he finally found that “something more” that he needed in his life, that he finally gave himself complete to Christ. As a matter of fact, in the apocryphal Acts of Pilate, he is eventually baptized by Peter and John and becomes a leader of the church. And that may explain why, in latter years, it is said that the former Pharisee who was so afraid to commit himself fully was

⁴ The Confessions of St. Augustine, Sheed & Ward, New York, 1942, p. viii

⁵ Ibid, p. 3

eventually martyred for refusing to recant his faith in the one who gave him everything for which he ever sought.

“Oh God, I don’t love you, I don’t even want to love you, but I want to want to love you.”

Over the next couple of weeks we will look into all of this a bit more closely. Zacchaeus knew something was missing, why else would he have climbed up into that sycamore tree? As she stood before Jesus, the woman caught in adultery probably sensed it too. And then, of course, there was that other Pharisee, the one formerly known as Saul, who found what he was looking for when he least expected it. Each of them found that for which they were looking. Hopefully, by the time we’re done with this, you will too.