

This morning we meet Nicodemus, who is a most fascinating character. And I say fascinating because when we examine Nicodemus' life, he is very much like you and me. We don't know much about Nicodemus, but the few things we do know suffice to give us a glimpse into his personality. First, Nicodemus is identified as a Pharisee. The Pharisaical party was made up of lay people who sought to live outwards lives of purity. They were well respected and influential in their community. Yet they were legalistic in their approach to life developing all kinds of strict guidelines for how to live properly in this world. Next, Nicodemus is identified as being a political leader of Jews. This meant that he was part of the Sanhedrin, which was the ruling body of his day. Finally, Nicodemus was wealthy. At the end of the Gospel of John, we hear how Nicodemus brought a hundred pounds of spices for Jesus' burial. Such a large amount of spices would have been very costly, and to give away such a large quantity to anoint Jesus' body for burial indicates that Nicodemus was a man of great means. To take this snapshot of Nicodemus then and conflate it into one stream of thought we can conclude that Nicodemus was an educated, wealthy, successful and privileged pillar of his community. He had everything most of us today would deem necessary for the attainment of the good life—status, influence, power, and abundant resources.

With this in mind, Jesus words are all the more perplexing and strange. And we get the sense that Nicodemus heard Jesus' words in just this way too. For Nicodemus went to Jesus under the cover of night so as not to be seen fraternizing with a known pariah. Nicodemus undertook this stealth-like quest to ask Jesus who He really was. Jesus refused to answer his initial question though. Instead, Jesus answered Nicodemus' real question; a question that Nicodemus himself did not know he needed answered. Jesus told Nicodemus that if he wanted to see the Kingdom of God he must be 'born again'. Nicodemus' snappy retort about entering a second time into his mother's womb lets us know that he found this statement of Jesus insulting. Hearing it as an insult would have been understandable considering Nicodemus position of inherited privilege. If you think about it, words like *re-birth*, *re-newal*, *re-generation* are all offensive. For what is implied in the concept of being 'born again' is starting over, a redo if you will. And the only reason you would need to redo something is if you had done it wrong the first time. But what had Nicodemus done wrong? He had done it all right. He had made all the right decisions and done all the right things to put himself in the right positions to achieve the right

advancements of this life. And yet here stood this rebellious Rabi telling him that he had been investing his time in all the wrong ways and focusing his energy in all the wrong places his entire life. How dare this outcast impugn the character of a high ranking official!

Nicodemus could have stormed off and that would have been the end of it. And many Pharisees throughout Christ's ministry did just that. Christ's presence and teachings were offensive and many could not handle the hard truths; they could not handle their whole world being questioned and turned upside down. But Nicodemus stayed. Something kept his feet planted firmly in that place. He stayed because he heard the Gospel and in that moment it pierced his heart and exposed his soul. In that moment, he saw his whole life before him, and he knew it to be a façade. He saw his whole life for what it was- bankrupt. Yes, he had it all, but really he had nothing. He did not have Christ and so he did not have the one thing needful. He had been traveling down the path of self-ambition and Christ stopped him in his tracks. Nicodemus needed to alter his course. He needed to start over. He needed a new life, a new direction. He needed to become a new person. He needed to be born again. The beauty of the story is that Nicodemus wasn't a bad man. In fact, Nicodemus was good in the worst sense of the word. For his goodness was of a worldly type. So let us end this morning by thinking about Christ's words to Nicodemus. Christ told Nicodemus he needed be born again. Actually what he told him was he needed to be 'born from above'. For that is the literal translation of the verse: For to see the Kingdom of God one must be born from above. This is the language of Baptism where we are born from above by water and the Holy Spirit. This is the language of transcendence where Christ calls us to be in the world but not of the world. This is the language of faith where we set our hearts and minds on the things above and seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. This is the language of God for you cannot serve two masters—It is God or everything else. For you see until this world holds no appeal to us the message of the Gospel will always be foolishness. Until we become sick of sin and suffering and brokenness the healing power of the Gospel will never be that meaningful. So much of what we do in this life is a waste of time. Only God can bring us to this insight. And He does this by His mighty Spirit and faith. We learn to say with Christ, 'what is this world to me?' And in that moment we are borne above our earthly plight, we transcend our earthly condition, and we are born again into the Kingdom of God where Christ welcomes us with open arms. Amen.