

“AN UPSETTING CONVERSATION”

A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, March 12, 2017

Text: John 3:1-17

I struggled to find an illustration which could express how disruptive the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus was. Jesus pulled the rug out from under Nicodemus. He upended his reality.

It's sort of like this:

Once I was playing Monopoly with my brothers. And a cousin.

I loved Monopoly. Maybe, because my own life was lousy, economically. The Feldes didn't buy houses, we rented. When we moved, it was usually not because Dad got a better job but because he lost the last one. But when I played Monopoly I could pretend life was all right. The game started with a level playing field, and \$1500 in hand. I had as much chance of getting Boardwalk and Park Place as anyone else. I worked hard at it. I was an intense player. I sometimes won.

Well, not this time. I was winning. I had hotels on Boardwalk and Park Place. People were dropping by and paying up.

As I recall it, that was when one of my brothers brought the game to a close by dumping everything off the game board. Everything went flying.

Why do I still remember? Because I learned something.

At first, I was merely angry and hurt. I had been robbed.

But in time I also learned something important. A game is just a game. Games are shaky.

The way Jesus interrupted Nicodemus' train of thought reminds me of someone shaking the pieces off a game board.

Nicodemus went to Jesus because he was curious. He knew part of the truth. He wanted Jesus to just fill in the gaps. "We know you are a teacher sent from God . . ." he said.

Well, if he was so sure about that, why did he come to Jesus by night? Because he knew (what we read at the end of chapter 2 of John) that Jesus had been doing signs in Jerusalem and people were believing in him. On the other hand, Jesus had caused a terrible scene in the house of the Lord temple, disrupting a practical system which was in place to ensure a steady traffic of sacrifices and offerings and prayers. Jesus had made enemies. In verse 24 it says, "Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people."

This was a big problem for Nicodemus. He was a systematic theologian, and this did not all fit together. So he investigated.

But Jesus gave him a hard time about everything he said.

Jesus: Only those who are born from above see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus: Impossible!

Jesus: Absolutely necessary.

Nicodemus: How in the world!

Jesus: Are you a teacher of Israel, and you don't understand?

Nicodemus: No further answers are recorded. Rather, Jesus goes on and on.

What happened in that dialogue? Jesus turned upside down the gameboard in Nicodemus' head.

The unkindest thing Jesus said to Nicodemus was this: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" Meaning, the absolutely essential first things?

This reminds me of one other time Jesus engaged a bunch of teachers. He was twelve. His parents had lost him in Jerusalem.

After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

Awkward for those teachers.

This was also awkward for Nicodemus. Jesus was showing him up.

Because, although Jesus was himself a teacher by this time, "to teach" was not the same for Jesus as it was for Nicodemus, or for the Pharisees and Scribes.

When Jesus said "You must be born again," or "You must be born from above," (two different translations), he was not just throwing a curve ball which was difficult to hit. He was calling the whole game into question. Nicodemus was bewildered. His understanding of the parameters within which we live and move and become righteous did not include something as dramatic and powerful as being born all over again. That was a ridiculous notion.

His confusion is the same as the confusion of other people who encountered Jesus and found it impossible to fit what he said into their own preconceptions about how things are. Many people were content to work with what they already understood, rather than open their eyes to the otherworldly logic of Jesus.

He said things like "the first will be last," and so on. "Pay the ones who worked only one hour the same as those who worked all day." Things like that. "Your sins are forgiven." And so on. He compared a

disreputable woman favorably to a righteous leader. Said the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist, who was the greatest man ever.

We can learn from Nicodemus how not to beg from God.

When we open our empty hands to God, and ask for a blessing, we need to prepare for a shocking result. He will not just give us a fish; nor will he settle for teaching us to how to fish. He will give us new birth.

What will Jesus the Teacher do for those who have empty hands extended his direction? To use the language of this reading: He will tell you what he knows about what he has learned because he has come from the Father. That is to say, he will testify. He will be lifted up, before you, as the serpent was elevated by Moses in the wilderness for the healing of those who had been bitten by serpents. He will heal you, if you believe in him. His Spirit will give you new birth, and you will understand these things.

That is the Jesus Curriculum.

Jesus, the teacher, and all he stood for, could not be fit into the curriculum Nicodemus was currently using in his living room classroom. He didn't fit.

If you want too little from Jesus, you may be disappointed. If you think he uses your language, your grammar, your syntax, your set of rules; if you think he will squeeze himself into your agenda, your program: guess again. If you expect him to fill your shopping bag with what is on your list, you might better look elsewhere.

Here in John 3, where Jesus outlines his life work, we find out what we will learn throughout in the gospel of John: Jesus wants to give life to the dead by infusing them with grace and truth. Those gifts are not going to be received equally well by everyone.

People who are winning at the game they are currently playing will just look up from their gameboards, smile lamely, and go on playing by the rules that give them the advantage. They don't want the gospel to disrupt what they have got going on. They want to keep on winning, even if it's just Monopoly.

But some of us who are losing—some of us lucky beggars who know the truth about ourselves will look twice at what Jesus is offering. We will realize how badly we need the peace he is offering not as a prize for winners but as a victory in itself. We will extend empty hands for his blessing, and he will give it. To anyone who will receive it.



“Whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Amen.

