

*Face-to-Face with Jesus: The Language of Faith*

*John 3: 1-17*

*February 17, 2008*

I love language, as many of you know. But I also have learned that I don't switch very well in language from the literal to the figurative. I seem to get stuck in either one mode or another. When I was in the computer business many years ago they made all the salespeople learn a little about programming languages. Now if you have ever written computer code you know how incredibly detailed you have to get to instruct a computer, a machine, to do anything. Back in the days when the mainframe dinosaurs roamed the earth we would write in cryptic languages such as ASSEMBLER or COBOL. In these languages you would have to describe in precise detail how data was to be manipulated, where the input files would come from, what format they would be in; what the process would be and where you would store, print or display the output. I was awful at that level of detail but I loved the math. I could do all the math, including changing from decimal to hexadecimal or binary (what computers use) in my head. Conversely, as an English major, I loved the figurative language of poetry and prose. But I never mixed them very well. I would get stuck in mode or another. But I have always liked problem solving, either linguistic or mathematical.

One of the truly great mathematicians and physics geniuses of all time was Albert Einstein. Einstein was noted for many great quotes as well as the founder of quantum physics. Two of my favorite quotes from Einstein are: ""Imagination is

more important than knowledge" and "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

In a kind of curious way, when Nicodemus from our gospel text gets face to face with Jesus that's exactly what Jesus says to him. Even with all the laws and traditions you know, Nicodemus, knowledge isn't enough; you must have imaginative faith. And to understand the mission of Jesus Christ in the world and the problems that his ministry came to solve you must go to a new level of thinking than you have ever thought with before. Nicodemus struggles mightily with the language that Jesus uses. Imagine: here is a scene where they probably both spoke in Aramaic; the original text written down two generations later in a different language, that is, Greek. And then we have it accessible to us translated in English. And we understand more about what Jesus was saying than the man with whom he was face-to-face. Amazing! Nicodemus brings a language of literal reality and Jesus speaks in the imaginative language of faith. Nicodemus understands that one who performs miraculous signs and wonders must be of God. He comes at night, away from the distracting crowd and at the hour that was the best hour to learn from the rabbi. He is told that he must undergo a dramatic conversion, be born again. His mind is thinking in programming terms – you mean I must re-enter my mother's womb! How can that be? Jesus speaks in rich, figurative language of the Spirit moving in unseen, unheard ways to change hearts. Why? Because God is so concerned with the welfare of all God's children, not of judgment.

So we end the scene with Jesus saying perhaps the most famous words in all of the gospels, but what happens to our friend Nicodemus? Is he changed in any way in this brief encounter? The answer is “yes.” We have two other sightings of Nicodemus later in John and one I would also like to point out from the apocryphal witness sometimes called the gospel of Nicodemus. Later in chapter seven in John the Scribes and Pharisees are trying to get the Temple police to arrest Jesus for heresy. Nicodemus, still one of them, a high-ranking Pharisee, steps in the middle on behalf of Jesus to suggest that they are not even following their own laws. His friends harshly rebuke him. In the Gospel of Nicodemus this man goes even further in intervening with Pontius Pilate to get him to release the falsely accused Jesus. The Gospel of Nicodemus says, “But a certain man, Nicodemus, a Jew, came and stood before the governor and said: I beseech thee, good (pious) lord, bid me speak a few words. Pilate saith: Say on. Nicodemus saith: I said unto the elders and the priests and Levites and unto all the multitude of the Jews in the synagogue: Wherefore contend ye with this man? This man doeth many and wonderful signs, which no man hath done, neither will do: let him alone and contrive not any evil against him: if the signs which he doeth are of God, they will stand, but if they be of men, they will come to nought. For verily Moses, when he was sent of God into Egypt did many signs, which God commanded him to do before Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and there were there certain men servants of Pharaoh, Jannes and Jambres, and they also did signs not a few, of them which Moses did, and the Egyptians held them as gods, even Jannes and Jambres: and whereas the signs which they did were not of God, they perished and those also that believed on them. And now let this man go,

for he is not worthy of death.” He even admits, while being pressed by Pilate and the Pharisees, that he had become a follower of Christ. Finally in chapter nineteen Nicodemus, now out in the open in his following brings 100 pounds of myrrh for the anointing of the body of Jesus. Even as all the disciples have scattered in fear, Nicodemus is there to anoint the body of his new Lord.

Many know little of this story other than the famous line from John 3:16 and it is the source of the term “born again.” This phrase has been hijacked in recent years to describe the conversion experience. There is much ambivalence for this term for the false kind of conversions that are described as being born again. But we must ask ourselves the question if we take Jesus seriously, what implications does it have for our personal and corporate lives for hearing the language of faith that he speaks when Jesus describes being born again? What aspects of true conversion do we see in the example of Nicodemus? There are a few elements in the example of Nicodemus that point us toward true conversion of heart. First, what Nicodemus shows us is that ***conversion usually gets into more trouble, not out of it.*** I wish I had a dollar for every time I hear about someone being born again, of finding Jesus, just in time to save their reputation or get them out of some hot water. Nicodemus shows us the opposite. If he was truly born again, and I think he was, he gets into all kinds of new trouble. His old buddies question him and threaten him for his new allegiance. The second sign of true conversion is that you sometimes ***need to change relationships with the changing of past behaviors.*** The recovery community, a community that quietly witnesses to the power of conversion, has

shown me this truth. Just like Nicodemus got introduced to some really different people than his powerful friends in the Sanhedrin when he hooked up with the disciples, true conversion calls us to hang out with new folks. If we are dealing with addictions, we need to find new friends other than our old drinking and drugging buddies. We show up at new places for support and community. A true conversion places us in brand new places with new people. If you are struggling with conversion in any area of your life, maybe what you need most is new friends and new hangouts. The third sign of true conversion is that ***it breeds extravagant love***. At the time of Jesus' death Nicodemus is said to have brought 100 pounds of myrrh. Friends, that is an extravagant amount of perfume for the body. Think about Mary and the jar of pure nard. Think about Zaccheus and his extravagance in repaying all those people he had ripped off. True conversion breeds extravagant love.

Eight hundred years a rather ordinary man underwent a striking conversion. Born of nobility and living a upper class life of comfort he made a pilgrimage to Rome. In a vision he felt called by God to exchange his fine silken clothing for a beggar's rags. He lived among the poor for two days, calling them brothers for the first time. Next he approached an untouchable, a leper, a despised person among the group he feared most. He embraced and kissed the man, letting go of the fear that had gripped him all of his 24 years of life. Lastly, he helped with a church repair project. Over a few days, he reinterpreted that project not in literal terms but in the figurative terms of reforming Christ's church in the dark times of the Middle Ages. That man was Francis of Assisi. From that humble, singular life a movement started

that lasts until this very day. In a phrase, Francis was born again, understanding for the first time the language of faith. He felt the movement of the spirit, moving like a unseen wind, in his heart. Does that same spirit move in you in the season of Lent? It can, you know. It starts with listening...not just for the literal words of Jesus, but seeing how those figure into the new plans of your life.