

TEXT: John 3:1-17

TOPIC: While Jesus and Nicodemus may have shared similar beliefs, they didn't really speak the same language.

SUBJECT: Jesus' explanation to Nicodemus is an explanation to us to think about what ministry really is.

TITLE: Now think. THINK!

PRAYER

I forget the professor's name, but I will never forget what he taught me through the English Lit and American Lit classes I took with him.

What he taught me had little to do with Shakespeare or Charles Dickens or Mark Twain or Jane Austin. My English and American lit professor taught me one of the most valuable life lessons I've ever learned. What he taught me became a guiding life principle I use practically every day. What he taught me had nothing to do with God, and everything to do with getting to know God.

As a Mass Communications student at the University of Denver, I wanted to choose a minor. Accounting classes made sure it wasn't a business minor, so I opted for an English minor.

The first class I took was English Lit. I did OK in the class, but no matter how well I completed assignments, I always got a C. So, I figured "well, English Lit is harder than American Lit, so I will do better next quarter." When the next quarter came, and when I took American Lit, no matter what I did, I got C's, and that frustrated me.

So, I decided the teacher didn't like me. One day I went to his office and knocked on the door. He answered the door and invited me in. He cleared a stack of books on the only chair he had in the office besides his desk chair and piled the pile on another pile of the piles and piles of books. He invited me to sit down.

But I stood there. Arms crossed. Full of attitude and self-righteousness because in my frustration, I was certain he didn't like me; not only did he not like me, he hated me.

“Have a seat Mark,” he said.

“I’m good standing right now because I only plan to be here a minute.”

“Then what can I do for you?”

That’s when I blurted it out: “I just want to know one thing: Why do you hate me?”

My professor sat there, stunned.

“Why do you think I hate you?”

I explained my sheer frustration with all the C’s he’d given me on well-written papers.

Then, he softened. “You’re right, Mark. You’ve turned in well-written papers, but they read more like book reports than the types of assignments I’ve asked my students to do. I don’t want a book report. I want you to tell me what the author is writing about and why he or she is writing it. Basically, Mark, I want you to think. Now, THINK!”

It was that second “THINK” that got me.

I share this story because it sounds every bit like what was happening when Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to talk about their similar beliefs, and their similar theologies. What Nicodemus and Jesus apparently didn’t share was a common language when it came to talking about God, and the way God’s Spirit moves through people’s lives.

One of the problems some of the Pharisees of Jesus’ day had, was that they commonly supported the belief that if they did the bare minimum with their faith – and the bare minimum meant keeping the letter of the law – they’d done enough. Often when people stay hard and fast to something they forget about the spirit of something. When it comes to faith, when the spirit of a law is lost and the letter of the law takes priority, I believe fear takes the place of grace, and fear almost always makes people judgmental.

I like to think that Nicodemus had, at least, a modicum of understanding of that because he'd seen it in his fellow Pharisees. Maybe that's why Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of the night: He didn't want the scorn and ridicule of having a talk with Jesus.

Maybe Nicodemus believed in Jesus the way many did in John 2:23-25. Maybe Nicodemus had heard or maybe even saw the signs and wonders of what Jesus was doing. If so, Jesus makes clear he really has no interest in a faith that is limited to veneration because a faith that is only limited to worship is an ingenuine faith, like the Pharisees of the day apparently had. An ingenuine faith is still ingenuine just like a faith that only goes through the motions isn't faith at all.

The only way for an ingenuine faith to become real is for it to awaken to the reality of God's love for the world, Jesus' redeeming work, and the Spirit's capacity to sustain us in the transforming relationship God is ready to give us, and waiting for us to receive.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of night, he came focused on one thing: Understanding how Jesus had been sent from God to do God's work. When he learned that he had to be born again (not entering into a mother's womb a second time), imagine the shock realizing what Jesus is doing is much larger than Nicodemus could have ever imagined.

Imagine this because every one of us is Nicodemus, and when the Spirit brings us to Jesus and we get to thinking – really thinking – about everything Jesus did, the result should be a fundamental shift in our lives, and if there isn't a fundamental shift, good chance faith has slipped from multiple things to a singular thing. After all, God didn't send Jesus to the world to be worshiped; God sent Jesus into the world to heal it, which is basically what salvation is. God sent Jesus into the world to be with those at the margins, where the church should be. God

sent Jesus to be with the poor, broken, jailed, sad, lonely and any others who get pushed aside, overlooked and unseen, but not for judging those folks, but for the sake of sharing grace and love with one another.

When my English and American Lit professor told me, "... think. Now THINK" he revealed to me a larger picture that taught me how to know myself better. When my English and American Lit professor said, "... think. Now THINK!" he taught me that going through life without any critical thinking skills was no way to go through life.

When Jesus basically said the same thing to Nicodemus, the same instructions probably apply to us whether we are told "think. Now THINK!" or something else. Faith should always have a butterfly effect so that when we live out faith, we genuinely inspire faith in others. Where we don't, what is likely needed is new life, new sight, and new light from above. After all, the kin-dom of God is not something that can be seen, observed or experienced simply as some human phenomenon. We observe, experience, and receive the kin-dom of God is what happens when we live into it with love, grace, hope, and the awareness that we are part of a much larger community that's been missed for a very long time.

In the name of the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in perfect community. Amen.