

This I Know

Second Sunday in Lent, Year A - John 3:1-17

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, March 16, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

My dear wife is quite fond of reminding me that my brain works in some ridiculous ways. To her frequent amusement, and all too often annoyance, I can forget the most basic detail about every day goings on, literally embodying the old cliché about the husband that drags home a basket of groceries while forgetting the one thing for which he was sent. Yet some seemingly random event or comment may trigger some synapse up there to fire off a multi-minute verbal stream of obscure, esoteric information that got stuffed in there over the years, usually accompanied by the equally verbose story of how it got stuffed in there in the first place. And of course, I can see from the grins out there, that I have done the same thing with many of you as well. Having patiently attended to the entirety of one such response to a perfectly innocuous question that her mother told her to “go ask Fr. Rich,” one young parishioner once responded, “How do you know so much stuff nobody else ever even *thinks* about?”

What can I say? I know a lot of esoteric little tidbits and I like to share them. Like the one that always jumps from some dark little corner of my memory right to the front of my attention every time I read this morning's portion of John's Gospel.

It's hard to notice in the translation that we use now, but when the Pharisee Nicodemus came to Jesus, Jesus set him up – with a pun. I've told you before that I'm not much of a scholar of biblical languages, but this one is just too neat not to share. There in Jesus' first response to Nicodemus, Jesus uses a Greek word, *anōthen*, that can either mean “from above” as we heard it this morning, “...no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above,” *or* that word can mean “again” as in the King James Version that most of us know from growing up, “You must be born again.” Now here's the fun part, that verse right there, that Greek pun, is the source of the term, “Born Again Christian.” There's an esoteric tidbit to hand your “Born Again” friends when they think they've got the market cornered on things nobody else even thinks about.

That pun that I love so much is also the source of Nicodemus' confusion. Nicodemus, this rabbi, this learned man, this “teacher of Israel,” came to Jesus looking for answers, and Jesus gave him a play on words. Jesus threw out the bait and the scholarly teacher, this knower of esoteric tidbits snatched it right up. In his eagerness to have answers, Nicodemus heard Jesus' offer of the gateway to the Kingdom of God as yet another occasion for philosophical debate. What Jesus meant as an opportunity for transformation from above, Nicodemus took as an absurd physical impossibility, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” Nicodemus came to Jesus looking for answers, and Jesus gave him a whole new way of asking questions.

Nicodemus' moment of confusion gave Jesus the opportunity to explain that the physical world and the spiritual world are as different as water and the wind. When Nicodemus protested that he still did not know what Jesus was talking about, Jesus said, “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?” The problem wasn't so much with Nicodemus' understanding – the problem was with his *believing*.

On one level, someone can know a lot about a lot of things. They can base their conclusions and their decisions and their actions on that knowledge. They can accept, based on the evidence they have at hand, that they know enough to move forward.

Back when I was 35 years younger, and mmhmm pounds lighter, I used to teach people how to rappel. You've seen people do it in the movies or on *Amazing Race*. Rappelling is that “sport,” or in my case that military skill, where you use a rope to rapidly descend down the side of a tower or a rock cliff

or – *my* favorite – even out of a hovering helicopter. In my younger days, I not only *did* that, I taught *other* people to do it. It's a much easier picture to imagine, I suppose, if you remember the part about being mmhmm pounds lighter.

Anyway, we always started our training on the ground. With pictures and with diagrams and with a lot of reassuring words, my students would gather all the knowledge they needed to help them return safely to *terra firma*. Almost without exception, eventually everyone accepted the proposition that such a thing could be done, and that they would be okay. But at that point, standing there on the ground, knowing that didn't interfere with the way they lived their lives.

It was a whole different thing when we were standing together at the top of a mountain, or sitting in the open door of a helicopter. As we went over their equipment, as we checked the knots on their harness, as we ran their safety line through the carabineer attached to my own waist, I assured them that everything would be all right. In that moment, knowledge had to shift to belief. Because as you step out onto the face of the mountain, as the point of your support and control disappears from your sight, as you feel the tension of the rope that connects you to your teacher, you are *way* past knowing little esoteric tidbits. At that point, belief is no longer in your head but in your heart. You have set yourself in relationship with this person, and you are trusting him with your life.

Like many of us, Nicodemus was halfway there. He came by night to interview the new teacher in town. He knew this guy was good – he had seen the pictures – he had checked his references – but he wanted more information, he wanted to *know* more. He wanted to see the accident reports. He wanted to check out the insurance coverage. He wanted to handle the equipment, maybe try it on for size. He wanted the teacher to say something that would take away his doubts and make it easy for him to say yes. But *this* teacher would not cooperate.

Nicodemus wanted answers. But Jesus told him, in effect, that he already had gallons of answers available to him – what he needed was one drop of experience – one moment of transformation – so that he could leave all his answers behind. “*Believe* in me.” That was Jesus’ dare to Nicodemus, and to us. “Be born from above, and live.” As our Lenten journey continues, do we come to Jesus with questions and know about him... or do we come to him with belief that he can and will set us free?

“How can this be?” Those are Nicodemus’ last words in this passage, which makes him a sort of patron saint for all of us who get stuck looking down over the top of the cliff, knowing that it is *possible* to get home, but without the faintest idea of how to begin. “Here is how *life* can be,” Jesus says. “The answer is from above.” “Keep your eyes on *me*.” “Believe *in* me.” “Put your hand here.” “Now put up your feet on the edge.” “Lean back... lean back.” “Now... *fly!*”

So, yeah, I probably know entirely more than I need to know about stuff nobody else even thinks about. I know the part of the human brain that processes knowledge and I can name the twelve cranial nerves – and I am resigned to the knowledge that practically *nobody* cares about that. I know that the Council of Nicea from which we get the Creed we use most Sundays took place in 325 – it began on May 20, as a matter of fact – and I'm okay that you don't care about that. Because I *know*, and I *believe* with all my heart that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that *whoever* believes in him may have everlasting life.” And that is all *any* of us really needs to know.