

## Haydenville Congregational Church

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John 3:1-17

### “Don’t Be So Earnest”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Nicodemus comes at Jesus with a check-list.

He was a Pharisee, a leader in the Jewish community.

Probably an intellectual.

Probably someone raised to respect and honor the Rabbis in the community.

Probably someone not prone to slinking around at night.

But he comes to Jesus by night, not quite sure of Jesus’ credentials.

Nicodemus has his check-list, he has his questions.

He wants to figure this guy out.

Nicodemus may come with his doubts and his questions but Jesus is really not having any of it. Listen:

*Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’*

“No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Jesus is not addressing Nicodemus’ concerns. Nicodemus is saying: reassure me that you have come from God. And Jesus responds by saying no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.

Now Nicodemus is really lost. He must be a literal, linear sort of guy and Jesus’ response has confused not clarified things for him. So Nicodemus continues:

*‘How can anyone be born after having grown old?  
Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’  
Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God  
without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh,*

*and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.*

*So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'*

*Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?'*

How recently have all of you watched toddlers play together?

They engage in what is called "parallel play"—they are in the same room, playing with the same toys, but they don't really interact, they just play independently side by side. That's what's happening here....with Nicodemus and Jesus...

parallel **conversation**. Nicodemus is on one track and Jesus is on another and their dialogue just seems to miss.

One of the problems is that Nicodemus is trying to think his way into believing in Jesus.

He is leaning on and leading with his intellectual abilities.

He is trying to reason this out and think this through and muscle his way intellectually into an understanding of who Jesus is. He is trying to think his way into a faith that will carry him through.

Nicodemus is doing what so many of us do. You and I!

We have our check lists and our questions and we bat them around and that is GOOD....it IS GOOD! But in the end, I don't believe we can think our way into faith.

Just as Jesus tells Nicodemus that we must be born of the Spirit, I believe we must be touched by the Spirit to know God, and that does not happen on a purely intellectual basis.

Today I want to say to you all, my precious brothers and sisters, you can relax.

You don't have to work so hard to find God. You don't have to be so earnest.

I think if I had met Nicodemus I would have said, don't be so earnest.

Don't be so conscientious, don't be so literal, don't be so thorough.

Get out of your head.

Let the Spirit grab and surprise you.

Be soft and receptive, be open, waste time with God (as Bishop John Shelby Spong likes to say) waste time with God.

Let the Spirit appear and catch you in the cross-winds.

Maybe you can think your way into your faith but I am not convinced of that.

Oh dear...you're saying to yourselves...all those hours in Bible Study, all those evenings at Living the Questions, all those gatherings of the Book Group...now I hear that its all for naught?

Good, challenging intellectual work is needed to help our faith grow, to keep us questioning and to keep us on our spiritual journeys. Good deep intellectual work is GOOD for our faith, it simply is not usually the bedrock of our faith. We don't usually FIND GOD through our heads, we experience God through our hearts.

I don't think a DVD, or a Book Group or even Bible Study will make you find God—**they will all help you deepen your relationship with God.**

But finding God. That does not usually happen from the head down, it usually happens from the gut up.

It's an experience, not an intellectual exercise.

And we have to be soft and quiet, available, receptive and open to experience God from the gut up.

You can stop working so hard.

Envision God running down the path to meet you.

Let God reach you. Let God throw God's loving arms around you.

You don't need to be so diligent, so heady, so earnest! You can be tender and receptive, weepy and soft. You can be like a child—innocent, full of expectation, open.

In his book, Surprised by Joy, C.S. Lewis shares the story of his conversion from an angry atheist to a devout Christian. Raised in a church-going family in the Church of Ireland, Lewis became an atheist at age 15 and quite paradoxically described himself as being "very angry with God for not existing." Lewis had a conversion experience at age 31 after reading religious books and studying the occult. But it was one night when Lewis found himself standing and trembling in what he was sure was the presence of God that he fell to his knees and acknowledged that he experienced God in his midst, in his life, in his heart.

Listen to Lewis' words: You must picture me alone...night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

Intellectual work can prepare you...but at some point God sneaks in through your heart.

Waste time with God, Bishop Spong says, and it is good advice.

Be playful with your faith, don't work so hard.

God wants to and will find you if you are receptive, available and open.

Don't be so earnest.

John Wesley, the leader of the Methodist movement in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century is credited with creating something widely known and widely quoted called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. I wonder if you have heard of it. I find it useful.

John Wesley believed that there were four different sources that led us individually and collectively to theological understanding.

The four sources, according to Wesley, are:

Scripture: the Bible

Tradition: the two millennia history of the Christian Church

Reason: rational thinking and sensible interpretations

Experience: a person's and a community's journey with God.

Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was "revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason." Wesley believed that Scripture was primary, "revealing the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation."

I find the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to be fascinating. I think of it often and remember it through the word REST (reason, experience, scripture and tradition). But I don't totally agree with Wesley. He privileges Scripture as primary, "revealing the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation." I believe EXPERIENCE is primary.

I believe that once we EXPERIENCE GOD as present in our lives, moving through our lives, bringing us comfort, and offering us guidance that the other three follow, then we want to study Scripture—help me to understand what the Bible says, how our ancient brothers and sisters experienced God in their lives.

Then we want to learn about our tradition—how did the Christian Church develop, what were the turning points, who were the important figures, what was happening when?

Then we want to embrace reason—bringing our rational thinking and sensible, scholarly interpretations to Bible stories and to the difficult moral issues of our time.

Maybe I am wrong, but I think God sneaks in through our hearts and we are surprised by joy. I think the E comes first and the RST follow!

Oh dear you are wondering again...

If I cannot think my way to God how do I feel my way to God? Wesley said the formula was Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience and this Pastor is up on her high horse saying Experience is key and I need to let God find me—how in God's name do I do that?

I don't have an easy answer. I have already said that I think the key is not working so hard, but being open and soft, gentle and available and wasting time with God.

I can tell you how I experience God, and I know some of you have experienced God in these ways as well....

Here are three possible ways to encounter God...

**One is through prayer.**

Pray regularly. Talk to and with God daily.

If you are already praying regularly and nothing is stirring in your soul, trying praying to a different part of the Trinity. If you always pray to God, talk to Jesus. If you always talk to Jesus, pray to the Spirit. Mix it up, as my son would say, and see if you are surprised by joy, see if you experience the Divine. One good way to experience God is to talk **with God** and to listen **for God** often.

**A second way to encounter God is to be in nature.**

Sit by the Mill River, walk through that meadow on Adams Road, smell the flowers behind the Brassworks, watch for Canadian Geese, climb Mt. Tom alone some morning at dawn, drive to the Oxbow and look for Great Blue Herons, stare at the chickadees that come to the feeder outside your window, hike by the Quabbin and let your mind wander.

You may be surprised by God when you are quiet with and in nature.

**A third way to encounter God is through service.**

Serve a meal at the cot shelter program some cold winter night, play Bingo with Vets at the VA, bring sandwiches and soup to the men huddled by the fire in the meadows, sing to the residents at Hampshire Care, play with the kids on the pediatric ward at the hospital.

You may see the face of God in a Vet with no legs, a child with no hair, and a man with no home.

Nicodemus came at Jesus with his check list.  
He had questions and he wanted answers.  
But Jesus would not be pinned down.  
Nicodemus wanted concrete help but Jesus responded to his inquiries with  
references to Spirit, wind and birth...three of the most mysterious phenomena in  
our lives.

Had I been there, I would have said:  
Nicodemus, don't be so earnest.  
Let's go walk by the Sea of Galilee and waste time with God.  
Amen.