

John 3:1-12 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He 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." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ 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." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

This is the word of the Lord
Thanks be to God.

Over the past month, both of my sisters-in law had their very first babies. I have spent the past two days with my family in North Carolina, ooing and ahing over my two new nephews. Both are beautiful and healthy gifts of life from God. It was a wonderful experience for me to hold my brothers' new born babies. It was even better to watch my brothers and their wives be parents. They were all so full of the "knowledge" of parenthood. I thoroughly enjoyed watching them be so joyful over the new life of their son. They were so tired and downright exhausted from working all day and staying up all night, yet so happy and excited about their first-born son. And so eager to share their new experience with me. We covered everything from the painfully gory details of natural childbirth and c-sections to their sometimes horrifying, yet very laughable experiences of changing diapers, and the various strategies behind getting your child to sleep through the night. As I watched and listened, I was fully aware of how much I didn't know about specific details of childbirth and various strategies and scientific studies behind getting an infant to sleep through the night. As they shared their experiences with me it was evident that all I could do, all I needed to do, was listen. Even the slightest nod of the head would imply that I knew, that I understood what they had experienced in childbirth and what they were going through now. I didn't know. I couldn't possibly know what it is like to give birth and hold my newborn baby (and for those curious minds out there, I don't plan to know – at least not for another couple of years)

As my family joined together, all eight of us, mom, dad, brothers, and spouses, we shared our life experiences. I became aware of how much we all "knew" – or, really, how much we thought we knew. I found much irony in David's statement to John. David, dad of four weeks, drained and tired from the seemingly endless nights of his baby crying, says to John, dad of two weeks, in very much the same condition, "Well, you're doing it wrong. You've got to do this, this, this, and this, and then the baby will sleep through the night." At least that's what the research from the latest book he read said, because it was quite evident from the dark circles under his eyes that he didn't know what to do either.

The irony of his story reminded me of an all too familiar experience here at Emory. I too took what I thought to be true – my preconceived ideas and notions of how things work around here – and I didn't open my mind to the greater reality of truth, that I really haven't been here that long, so I don't exactly know how things are always done. I'm specifically thinking back to one of our staff meetings when Jill asked, "Does anyone remember what we usually do?" Staying true to my family, I without any hesitation replied and began telling her what we usually do for whatever event or activity we were discussing. Jill, in a very Jill-like manner kindly replied, "Deedra, in your vast years of experience here (which probably at the time didn't equal one) how do you know what we usually do?" I sheepishly grinned, and replied, "Well, last year..."

We are a people, a culture, who thrives off knowing and understanding – or at least thinking we know and understand. That is our innate nature and curiosity. What we don't know and understand we spend much time and effort trying to figure out. Think of how far in the last several decades we've come in the fields of medicine, technologies, and other scientific studies. We know. And what we don't know, we want to know and we try to figure out.

Regarding our faith, we know that God loves us. We know that God is always present with us. We know, we believe, we affirm each week that

God creates and calls us:

Jesus reconciles and redeems us;
The Spirit energizes and empowers us
For worship, love, and service!

We also know and affirm that

We believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell.

The third day He arose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.

Amen.

We know and have a basis for understanding God.

Nicodemus is also a man who knows something of God. He is a Pharisee, a teacher, a Jewish leader. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night and says 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, knowing a little more than Nicodemus on this subject matter, adds to Nicodemus’ statement. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Jesus, doesn’t rebuke Nicodemus’ knowledge. After all Jesus is a teacher who came from God. Jesus instead attempts to add to Nicodemus’ knowledge and understanding of God. Only, Nicodemus didn’t get it. He is thrown by the whole “being born from above” statement. Nicodemus tries to understand. He asks, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born? [on a personal note - after hearing firsthand, the details of the recent birth stories, I wonder how and why anyone would ask this question]

At first, it seems that Jesus and Nicodemus are having two different conversations with one another. They don’t seem to connect. Why would any born from above have to enter the womb a second time? It helps to understand that when Jesus uses the Greek word for being born from above, he is really using a play on words. It is a word that has two meanings, 1. to be born from above, 2. to be born again, anew. It is really hard to translate a word with two very different meanings into one English word. So what happens is that the translators pick one meaning to go in the text, in this case “being born from above,” and they footnote the other meaning. In doing so, they put us a step ahead of Nicodemus who surely didn’t know or understand Jesus to be talking about being born from above. Instead, all Nicodemus hears is being born again. Which, rightly so, sounds kind of crazy. Who can enter a second time into their mother’s womb and be born again?

Jesus replies, “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.” So in other words, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Not exactly; let me try again. You can’t know God. That is, you can’t know how God is working in the world, where God is working in the world, or through whom God is working in the world, if you aren’t born of both water and Spirit. Water – symbolizing both the water of fleshly birth, the water that breaks indicating that the baby is coming and you better get to the hospital, and the water of baptism that symbolically unites us

with God and marks the receipt of the Holy Spirit in our lives, so that we are born of both water and spirit. Jesus implies that for Nicodemus to truly know him, to know God, he must be born of both water and spirit. Jesus realizes Nicodemus doesn't understand. He says, "Don't be astonished that I said to you, 'you must be born from above/again.'" In essence Jesus is saying, "Take time to really think about this...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, still very clueless, replies, "How can these things be?"

It is at this point in the story, where I'm tempted to explain, as best I can, Jesus' response to Nicodemus. What it means to be born of the spirit. What it means to have the Holy Spirit living with you, and how we live out this new life that Jesus has given us. That's what I would have liked to do, anyway. But Nicodemus just wouldn't leave me alone. He just kept poking at me, and nagging at me, until finally I had say, "Okay, what is it? What do you want to tell me? What's so important that I can't focus on the spirit living within us or the new life Jesus gives us?"

I read back through Nicodemus' story recounting what we know...baptism...spirit...eternal life. I'm thinking, "Come on Nicodemus, we've got it; we know it; We've learned from your mistake. You've helped us out, made it easier for us to understand. Thank you!"

And that's when it hit me. That's exactly it! We know it. – or at least we think we know. Nicodemus is laughing at us (at least in my imagination). He's recalling his story; observing our story, and laughing at the irony of our thoughts and actions. It's the same irony we find when David, dad of 4 weeks, says to John, dad of 2 weeks, "You're doing it wrong," when David doesn't really know what he is doing himself. Nicodemus cries out between his chuckles, "Don't you see what you're doing? With all your knowledge and understanding, you're making the same mistake I did. Sure you can learn from my mistake. You read my story and can tell me what I missed...spirit...baptism...eternal life...All very important things, but in all reality you're still following in my footsteps. I mean, truly it's nice that you can point your finger at me and say,

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Night – A time when no one would know he was going; in essence he was sneaking off to see Jesus, so he wouldn't be rebuked by the other Pharisees; so he wouldn't lose his job; or be rejected by those who respected him. Nicodemus came at night, a time (in the book of John) that symbolizes the absence of God. He comes with the absence of God into the light, the presence of God, he comes to Jesus and tells Jesus what he knows, and he is truly seeking to learn more. But you see, Nicodemus isn't able to understand what Jesus says, because he is trying to fit what Jesus says into his previous understanding of God. He is trying to fit God's word into what he already knows to be true, he is not open to a new understanding. thus enabling himself to miss the fullness and truth of God's word.

Nicodemus points out, that's exactly it! All of this about me is true, but what is also true is that you are just as blind as I was.

That's when it hit me, we – you and me – we come into God's presence, we come to God's word, we come to Nicodemus' story in just the same manner that Nicodemus came to Jesus. We come at a time and a place that is convenient and safe for us. We come not at night, but in broad daylight on Sunday morning. A time when many of colleagues and friends are still sleeping. They are tucked away in their beds, not even concerned with what we're up to. We enjoy the safety and security of our community. It's a safe place to share, engage challenging thoughts, and to grow ...(and that in itself is a wonderful thing). But too often we don't bother to tell our sleeping or busy friends and colleagues that we're going to church, seldom do we invite them to join us, and rarely do we share with them what we've learned. I'm not talking about beating them over the head with the Bible, or forcing/pressuring them to believe as you do. I'm just wondering, if we ever have conversations about God and our experiences and relationship with God outside of the security of our church community? Not just outside of the church walls, but outside of our friends at church? If this is true, why is it so? Just something to ponder: are we coming to God as Nicodemus did in the safety and security of the night?

And also do we come with a closed set of preconceived understandings that God's new word must fit into?

In the night, Nicodemus comes before Jesus and says, "We know you are from God." We, in turn, come before God knowing the whole gospel story; knowing that we have God's spirit living within us – teaching us, guiding us, loving us, helping us to better understand God. I wonder how many times, we are again like Nicodemus. Do we come before God, do we come seeking to experience God, trying to discern God's word by putting it in our own box? Are we trying to figure out how to put what God is teaching us into what we already know to be true?

It reminds me of a children's toy. You know the one, a ball with different shapes cut out in it – stars, squares, circles, triangles. The objective of the toy was to take the shapes and put them into the corresponding holes. Only stars fit in the star hole, squares in the square hole. And a triangle definitely wouldn't fit in the circle hole. As a child, no matter how many times I tried, no matter how much force I used I could never get the triangle to go into the circle hole. It just didn't work. So I usually ended up setting the triangle down and moving on to fit another shape into another hole.

Nicodemus couldn't get the triangle to fit in the circle either. He tried. Every question he asked of Jesus, was like picking up the triangle looking at it, turning it around, and trying to put it back into his preconceived understanding and knowledge of the circle. It didn't fit.

We don't know if Nicodemus ever picked up the triangle block again after this story. Surely, he did, as we see him again in chapters 7 and 19 defending and tending to Jesus, but it is never clear if the triangle ever fit into Nicodemus' circle, but he certainly kept trying and that's what we need to do with God's word that just doesn't seem to fit into our preconceived circle.

Let's go back to the question "Are we trying to figure out how to put what God is teaching us into what we already know to be true?"

Sure we are. ...how do we not?

Let's wrestle with this for a minute. How do you come to God without any preconceived notions and understandings? Is it possible? Is it right? What we know of God is extremely important to us and in many cases fundamental to our faith and relationship to God. Our knowledge of God is built from our shared experiences with God and God's word. It's not like we can just throw all of that away. These are valid and true experiences too...but there has to be some way that we can come before God without taking a sledge hammer to the triangle in attempt for it to fit in our circle or putting the triangle aside, never to pick it up again, or throwing away our circle and just start with a triangle hole...Uhhh...

Maybe it's an awareness. Awareness of what we know; awareness of what we believe to be true; and an awareness that God's word might reveal a completely different understanding; a totally new way of thinking or responding. Maybe God's triangle block doesn't have to fit into our exact preconceived circle that we have prepared for it. Instead, maybe with a little bit of effort, okay-more truthfully – with some deep soul searching – we can extend/stretch the circle. So that we allow God to open our hearts to the new truth of God's word. And then with God's help, we can truly respond and change our circle in such a manner that it not only incorporates God's triangle, but also uses it and responds to it.

This week I challenge you to think and pray about the Word from God or experience of God that you have been wrestling with lately. How is God's word different or similar to what you thought or what you wanted it to be? Why do you think God's Word doesn't fit into your circle? Keep pondering and keep praying with a new awareness of how God may be working in your life.