

“Night Class”
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
 March 12, 2017

Psalm 121

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills — from where will my help come?
- 2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
- 4 He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
- 5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
- 6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
- 7 The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
- 8 The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

John 3: 1 - 17

1Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2He 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.”

3Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

4Nicodemus 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?” 5Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8The 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.”

9Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10Jesus 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. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

It has been said that the gospel of John
 often given to new believers as the first gospel they should read
 It has often been said that it is
 “Shallow enough for a child to wade in and deep enough for an elephant to swim.”¹

These verses from the third chapter of John are the poster child for that statement.
 Familiar. Quotable.
 You can hold a sign up with John 3:16 on it at your favorite sporting event,
 and everything will know what you are saying.
 Or.... think that they know.

Because while these verses are so much more.
 So much deeper and wider than most of us imagine.
 They are the word and truth of God.
 Words that call, compel, and comfort us ~~ all at the same time.

The German Poet Rilke once wrote in a letter,
 “...cherish the questions themselves like closed rooms and like books written in a very strange
 tongue. Do not search now for the answers, which cannot be given you because you could not live
 them. It is a matter of living everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually,
 without noticing it, one distant day live right into the answer.”²

Questioning is the theme of Nicodemus’ meeting with Jesus.
 Nicodemus, a Jewish leader of the day, approaches Jesus wanting wisdom.
 Truth. Answers to life’s persistent questions.
 He thinks that Jesus might be able to give him the answers,
 because he hears of what Jesus has been doing.
 So he goes at night.

That Nicodemus goes at night is no small thing.
 It is at night when he can avoid being seen.
 There are no motion-sensor-lights in Jesus’ time.
 At night Nicodemus can avoid having his colleagues know that he has these questions.
 These curiosities.
 He is hungry for the bread of life that only Jesus can give,
 but he wants to maintain the respectability of his leadership, his faith.
 He wants to maintain the divisions that Jesus invariability refuses to recognize.
 Is incapable of honoring.
 Jesus, a man who preached love without borders.

But that Nicodemus goes at night not only tells us about his condition, his situation,
 it also reveals truths about ourselves.

¹ <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john3x1.htm>

² Ranier Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet. Reginald Snell, translator.

About the disciples.

Darkness refers to blindness.

Our inability to see. **Our** inability to understand.

It is a signal for what is about to unfold.

Nicodemus asks Jesus for insight, but cannot understand what Jesus tells him.

Maybe because Nicodemus' mind is too fixed on the physical world.

Maybe because his mind won't open up to consider possibilities beyond what he wants to hear.

For whatever the reason, he does not understand Jesus.

Nicodemus keeps on asking, thinking that maybe if he rigorously pursues a line of questioning he will be rewarded.

Nicodemus asks Jesus to teach him, and Jesus tells him,

"no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus doesn't understand, You can't be physically born twice, can you?

Jesus answers, explains, he's not talking about the breath of the body that welcomes us into the world and is the last thing we expel before we leave this world, he's talking about the breath of the Holy Spirit.

Nicodemus doesn't understand, How can this be, he asks?

Jesus wonders how this spiritual leader cannot understand the basic spiritual principles that are being proposed here. But he tries again, and tells Nicodemus that he, Jesus, is the Word made Flesh. Sent by God. The only-born son of God. Sent to love, to share love, to unite the world with love.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus in the night, who cannot understand what is being said, has the truth placed right before his eyes. It hasn't worked for Jesus to tell him, so Jesus must show him, in words that call forth images, and actions, and salvation itself.

Nicodemus cannot see it, so Jesus must use his words to **show** Nicodemus.

How true is that in the life of faith, it is a matter of showing, not telling.

30 years ago, my family, along with two other families, took a trip to England. We were at Westminster Abbey, and after the tour we were given the rare opportunity of exploring a bit on our own. I let two of the fathers in our group know where I would be and asked them to come and get

me when they were ready to go. They didn't. They forgot and they left without me. And all of a sudden I looked up from where I was and realized that I was alone. I tried to find my way to the car park, the parking lot, that was easier said than done. Westminster Abbey might as well be classified as a maze. And so I asked for directions. Once. Twice. Three times. The people I asked were kind, they told me where to go, step my step, but each time, in my panic, I didn't find my way, I only got more lost. There were so many rights and lefts I just couldn't find my way. Until finally I asked again, this time I found a monk wearing Franciscan clothing. And maybe he saw the fear, the tears in my eyes, or maybe it was just his nature, but he didn't give me directions, he took me by the arm and lead me to where I wanted to be, just in time for the bus that was carrying our group to pull up and retrieve me. Someone in our group, not a member of my own family I might say, had realized that I was not with them, and they had turned around. I had been lost, and someone **telling** me the way just didn't work. I needed someone to **show** me the way.

Nicodemus doesn't understand and doesn't understand and it must have been obvious to Jesus that Nicodemus was getting more and more lost, and so Jesus took him by the arm and showed him the way in the most basic language possible and tells Nicodemus, tells us, that God has come to teach a new way of love, a way of love that is not just for me or for you, but for something bigger, the world.

Love. Which is, once again, like the water which we can sip and the water in which we can drown.

For love, here, is not about what we feel, it is about how we live.

Eberhard Arnold writes, "The only work a man [we] can do with his [our] whole soul[s], work full of spirit and pulsing life, comes from love. And there is no love that does not get to work. Love is work: practical, strenuous work of muscle and mind, heart and soul. The kingdom of love, therefore, must be a kingdom of work. Work, truly unselfish work, animated by the spirit of brotherliness, will be the mark of the future, the character of the mankind to be. Work as spirit, work as living reality, such as we all have lost; work as dedication in enthusiastic love of togetherness - that is the fundamental character of the future. Joy in togetherness will show as joy in work."³

Love, Jesus says. It all boils down to love. It all builds up to love. Which is creation and salvation all in one. It founds all things and changes all things.

Love. Not just God's love for us, but God's love for the entire world. The people we like and the people we don't. The people that are familiar and the ones we just can't understand.

In an issue of the Christian Century several years ago on the topic of risk, one of the former counselors I worked with at Camp Calvin in Georgia, now married to another of the counselors from that summer, wrote an essay, in which she said,⁴

³Selected Writings of Eberhard Arnold. Copyright © 2011 by Plough Publishing House Rifton, NY 12471 USA, page 121-122.

⁴Kirstin Batchelor Fort Riley, Kansas <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-06/risk>

When I was 24 I moved to Hawaii to marry an army guy. I left my home, job, and friends behind in Minnesota. Some of them asked me what the hell I was doing, and I didn't blame them. My decision seemed a crazy risk—yet deep down it made perfect sense to me. They saw my move as a rash decision; I knew that I was joining my best friend, but I knew nothing about army life. No one in my family had ever been in the military.

I felt sick to my stomach as I sat on the plane. I didn't want to run away, but I couldn't quite believe what I was doing. A woman across the aisle from me said that her husband was stationed at Fort Something-or-other, and I thought, "That will be me someday." I fingered the hat that my fiancé had given me. It had his unit's crest on the front as well as the motto *Nec aspera terrent* (no fear on earth). I tried to feel less fear.

I had bought a round-trip ticket as a safety net. For the entire first year of our marriage, I was scared—certain that someone was going to pull me over and tell me I couldn't be there, or that they'd discover that I had protested the Gulf War, or that my mom had given money to an antigun lobby.

Now it's been 17 years, two deployments, eight moves, and too many lonely days and nights to count. I've learned about all-night road marches and how uniforms are worn (and laundered). I've learned that "going out to the field" means that I won't see my husband for a week or two and that being "in country" means that he's not in this country.

I've lived a life that it had never occurred to me to dream about, but I'm glad I took the risk. It led me to take other risks: crossing a glacial river barefoot, starting, restarting, and re-directing a career in ministry. Some risks have paid off. Others haven't ended as well.

I believe that God wants us to take some risks that challenge us and help us grow. We're not meant to bury our lives, hide them away, and keep them safe. God asks us to put ourselves out there and not cling so tightly to what is known and certain that we miss something beautiful, joyful, scary, and exhilarating—something through which we might touch the Holy.

For true love, what risks would you be willing to take?

What work would you be willing to do?

How much more true is that of the love of God?

The love that Jesus came to teach and share and show.

Love, the kind of love Jesus shows us, doesn't ever stand still. It gets to work.

For the child who finds themselves lost.

The refugee looking for a better life.

The man recently diagnosed with cancer in need of treatment.

The young mother, unable to feed her children.

The addict, afflicted with a disease that controls every aspect of their lives.

It is not them and us, it is only us that God loves, and we are in this together.

To share. To hope. To love. To get to work,

For God so loved the world. Amen.