

# Sermon: I've Got Questions

March 5, 2023

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

*by Eric Anderson*

Imagine this: someone you've heard a lot about has come to town. They haven't been famous for very long, but already you're curious. A day or two or three before, they'd done something big: clearing out a major annoyance in a very special place in your city. Lots of people were talking about that, and about other things he'd been up to.

So imagine that you decide to go see this famous fellow. You've got a reputation of your own; you're well respected, even have a leadership role. You're sure he'll want to see you, and you definitely want to see him. When night falls you find the place he's staying, and start the conversation by complimenting him for the things he'd done. "And if you don't mind," you conclude, "I've got questions."

He says, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again. Or from above." The phrase he uses for born again means both "again" and "from above."

So much for small talk. For that matter, so much for questions. When Nicodemus came that night to Jesus, he didn't even have time to ask a question, or to say, "I've got questions." Jesus launched right into the central demand of his ministry: Make changes. Big ones. Make them as soon as you can.

Poor Nicodemus. From John's account, it seems like he never got to ask his own questions. He could only follow where Jesus led – which is, come to think of it, what Jesus was demanding.

I honestly don't think Nicodemus was confused about Jesus' words. I think he was skeptical about the possibilities. Jesus declared that if people want to be part of God's community, they've got to make brand new starts. Nicodemus asked if people would really do that. Jesus replied that the Spirit of God was free to make such things happen. Nicodemus remained skeptical, and Jesus told him that the miracle of God's grace was as simple (and as challenging) as trust in God's love.

As Debie Thomas writes at [JourneyWithJesus.net](http://JourneyWithJesus.net), "When we speak of God's kingdom, we are in a realm of deep mystery. It's okay to be surprised. It's okay to be stricken. It's okay to take our time."

“After all, what Jesus was offering Nicodemus was not a tune-up, or a few minor tweaks to an already near-perfect life; it was a brand new life. A new birth. A fresh, down to the foundations beginning. What newborn enters the world without birth pangs, shock, disorientation, or pain? Downright bewilderment isn’t the exception in a birth story; it’s the rule. If we don’t find Christianity at least a little bit confusing, then perhaps it’s not Christianity we’re practicing.”

Ironically, some Christians have heard verse 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” – as the final exam for salvation. You can do that if you read “everyone who believes may not perish” in isolation. No belief; no salvation. You flunked the test.

But then comes verse 17 to tear up the test and throw it aside. “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.” Melissa Bane Sevier writes in her blog, “Κοσμος (cosmos) is the Greek word we translate here as ‘world’ (not the nifty little drinks with cranberry juice and a twist of lime). I did a quick online search of how various people have interpreted ‘world’ in John’s gospel. One site said that while ‘cosmos’ can sometimes mean the whole world, here in John 3 it is limited to God’s chosen.

“???”

“There’s no rationale behind such a statement. No, God loves the world. That’s the whole world.”

Who is God’s love for? At Working Preacher Karoline Lewis believes God’s love is: “For those fearful of deportation. For our transgender sisters and brothers singled out as criminals. For those of races other than white. For women who continue to march. For our Jewish brothers and sisters hated once again for their loyalty to the God of Israel, our God. For our Muslim brothers and sisters vilified for devotion and obedience. For the world, the cosmos, that wonders who will protect it.”

What change did Jesus demand of Nicodemus? What change does God demand of us?

I think it’s to love the whole world.

Well, I’ve got questions about that, too.

How am I supposed to love the warmongers, the selfish, the violent? How am I supposed to love the obnoxious, the stubborn, the lazy? How am I supposed to love those who put imperil

democracy, or censor books, or espouse racism? How am I supposed to love those who oppress, or seek to oppress, or make a really good effort to oppress?

I've got questions.

But this is where I, like Nicodemus, have to swallow them. We are both teachers of our religious traditions, and we both know – or knew – that the love of God isn't about feelings, it's about regard for our well-being. How God feels about us isn't relevant to God's love for us – believe me, I'm sure that I've irritated God beyond description, and God still works on my behalf.

It doesn't matter how you or I feel about anyone else. If we love, we set their interests at or above our own. That's what love is.

That's why Nicodemus was so skeptical about the possibilities.

That's why Jesus insisted on it so hard.

That's why it means so much that God embodied love in Jesus, and that God's love endured to the end, and beyond the end of Jesus' earthly life and ministry.

I've got questions, yes. But they dwindle and fade when I recognize once more the depth of God's love for the whole world and the challenge I'm given to love the world just the same.

Amen.