

## Grow By Asking Fresh Questions John 3:1-10

By all accounts, he was an ugly man. One author gives us the following description: “He had wide-set, bulging eyes that darted sideways and enabled him, like a crab, to see not only what was straight ahead, but what was beside him as well; a flat, upturned nose with flaring nostrils; and large fleshy lips like an ass. (He) let his hair grow long...and went about barefoot and unwashed, carrying a stick and looking arrogant. He didn’t change his clothes but efficiently wore in the daytime what he covered himself with at night.”<sup>1</sup> His name was Socrates and he’s considered to be the father of western philosophy, if not western thought in general. Central to his philosophy was what we now refer to as the Socratic Method. The Socratic Method is a method of seeking truth by asking and answering a long series of questions that peel away at our presuppositions and our operating assumptions and take us ever deeper into the realms of knowledge.

Without a doubt, questions are critical to the process of discovery and learning. In fact, most advances in knowledge have come by questioning long-held assumptions. For example, everyone knows the earth is flat and composed of just four basic elements: earth, air, fire, and water. And everyone knows the sun circles the earth – rising in the east and setting in the west. And everyone knows that bad humors or evil spirits cause disease. Correct? Well at one time or another, all of those theories were settled beliefs. But then one day, someone challenged those assumptions by asking fresh questions. And now we know that atoms are the building blocks of matter, the world is round and not flat, the earth circles the sun and not the other way around, and germs, not demons, cause disease. And our world is so much the better off for knowing these things – don’t you agree?

Well, what is true in every other field of human knowledge is true, also, in the field of religion. Good questions lead us to spiritual and religious growth. It’s not that there aren’t settled religious beliefs and timeless religious truths; it’s just that some settled beliefs and timeless truths may not be as settled as we imagine or as true as we suppose. But unfortunately, we are often reluctant to ask fresh questions when it comes to our religion. We’re afraid we’ll come to wrong conclusions and somehow jeopardize our souls as a consequence. So, we settle for settled beliefs and prefabricated answers handed down to us by those who went before us.

Now this is ironic given the fact that as Protestant Christians we trace our lineage back to Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic priest who questioned the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic church of his day and, by doing so, gave birth to the Protestant Reformation of which we are now a part. And as Methodist Christians, we can look back to our own founding father, the Reverend John Wesley, who provided Twenty-five Articles of Religion to the Methodist Episcopal Church in America instead of the Thirty-nine

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<sup>1</sup> Nails, Debra, "Socrates", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2020 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/socrates>.

Articles of Religion of the Church of England of which Wesley was a part. You see, in getting down to Twenty-five Articles, Wesley eliminated from the Thirty-nine Articles those Articles that applied only to the English context, and he further excluded those Articles that contained the Calvinistic theology with which he personally disagreed!

Given this history of religious questioning and dissent, it should surprise us that so many Christians are unwilling to question their beliefs for fear of somehow going wrong. But growth in religion, like growth in every other field of human knowledge, depends upon our willingness to ask fresh questions. In today's gospel reading we are introduced to a man named Nicodemus who grew in faith and knowledge by questioning his faith and knowledge.

The story begins with these words. "Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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.'" (Jn. 3:1-2) You see, as a Pharisee, Nicodemus belonged to a religious party that had a lot of settled beliefs and convictions. Although not all scribes were Pharisees and not all Pharisees were scribes, most scribes were Pharisees and all Pharisees would have been fully acquainted with and committed to the teachings of the scribes. And the scribes spent their days studying the Jewish law in meticulous detail and then laying down a whole host of religious regulations to ensure people obeyed the Jewish law in each and every respect. As a consequence, Nicodemus was a religious rigorist who had a settled answer for almost every religious question of his day!

"Quick, Nicodemus, how many positive commandments are in the Jewish Law?"

"That's easy – there are 248 positive commandments in the Torah!"

"And how many negative commandments are there?"

"There are 365 negative commandments."

"And how many sabbath regulations are there to ensure we don't somehow violate the prohibition against work on the sabbath?"

"Well let's see..." and off Nicodemus goes, reciting all the rules and regulations one by one! In the words of one commentator, "The scribes spent their lives working out these rules and regulations. In the *Mishnah* (the codified scribal law) the section on the Sabbath extends to no fewer than twenty-four chapters. The *Talmud* is the explanatory commentary on the *Mishnah*, and in the Jerusalem *Talmud* the section explaining the Sabbath law runs to sixty-four and a half columns; and in the Babylonian *Talmud* it runs to one hundred and fifty-six double folio pages."<sup>2</sup>

Yes, as a Pharisee, Nicodemus specialized in giving settled answers to religious questions. But then he began to have fresh questions of his own; he began to question the identify of this new rabbi – Jesus Christ. Who was this man, after all? Unable to

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<sup>2</sup> *The Gospel of John, Vol. 1, Revised Edition* by William Barclay, published by the Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975, p. 121.

arrive on his own at a fully satisfactory answer, he went to Jesus by night to learn a little bit more about him.

Now the fact that he visited Jesus by night indicates that he probably didn't want to be seen doing this by any of his Pharisaic friends. Although this is only the second time the Pharisees are mentioned in John's Gospel, in almost every other instance there appears to be a growing hostility between the Pharisees and Jesus because the Pharisees were consistently offended by the way Jesus lived his life and by the answers he gave to the religious questions of his day.

So, Nicodemus went at night to meet Jesus and began by paying Jesus an apparent compliment, for this much he had concluded on his own: "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." (Jn. 3:2) Sensing that Nicodemus was in an inquisitive mood, "Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'" (Jn. 3:3) Thus began one of the most enlightening dialogues recorded in the whole of sacred scripture – a dialogue helped along by the use of honest questions.

You see, upon hearing Jesus' statement about this new kind of birth, "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?'" (Jn. 3:4) With those two questions, Nicodemus revealed the limits of his understanding and sought greater insight into the meaning of this new birth. So, "Jesus answered (Nicodemus and said), '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.'" (Jn. 3:5-8) This statement led in turn to another question from Nicodemus. "Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?'" How indeed!

Now if this was a sermon about the new birth then I might spend the rest of our time trying to tease out the meaning of Jesus' words on that matter. And that would be an important sermon. After all, Jesus said, "You must be born again or born from above." (Jn. 3:7) But this sermon isn't about that. Instead, it's about the importance of asking fresh questions to gain fresh insight in order to experience fresh growth in spirit and new growth in knowledge. You see, whatever insight Nicodemus attained that night in questioning Jesus, it certainly resulted in a fresh appreciation for who Jesus was and a transformed life for old Nicodemus!

You see, the next time we meet Nicodemus is in John chapter seven. In that chapter, the Pharisees send the Temple police to arrest Jesus because they disagree with his teachings and resent his popularity with the crowds. But the police refuse to arrest Jesus. And when the Pharisees ask them why they didn't arrest Jesus, the police give the following answer: "'Never has anyone spoken like this!' Then the Pharisees replied,

‘Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed.’” Hearing this, Nicodemus speaks up in defense of Jesus. “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” he asks. (Jn. 7:45) It was a brave thing to do; for the mood of the Pharisees at this point was clearly against Jesus. But Nicodemus couldn’t be still. He had to speak out. Why? Because he must have learned something about Jesus on that first night of questioning that moved him to intervene on Jesus’ behalf.

The last time we see Nicodemus is shortly after Jesus’s death by crucifixion. John 19:38-40 says, “After (Jesus died), Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.” That was the bravest thing of all...caring for the burial of a convicted criminal in a climate of such hatred and hostility against him! And notice how John reminds us of that first encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus when Nicodemus came to Jesus with his questions in the night!

And so, Nicodemus shows us the importance of asking fresh questions – questions in search of greater insight and a better understanding of our Savior. My friends, don’t be afraid to ask fresh question and to challenge long-held assumptions and much cherished beliefs. Ironically, this isn’t the sign of a weak or a faltering faith, as you might suppose. Rather, it’s the sign of a living and an active faith – a faith in search of understanding! And when you ask those questions of your long-held and much-cherished beliefs, one of two things will likely happen. Either your beliefs will be confirmed in the light of fresh questions or they’ll be corrected – in whole or in part – as you search for new answers. But in every case, the answers will become your own – not just answers handed down to you by others – but answers discovered for yourself – and trust me – your faith will be enriched as a consequence of the discovery! Any questions? Enquiring minds want to know! Amen!