



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Sermon by Pastor Jami Anderson, March 20, 2011

Poor confused Nicodemus, poor searching Nicodemus, trying so hard to figure things out. I feel for the guy – I really do. I think that often my middle name is Nicodemus. See, sometimes I behave as one of those religious folks – someone dedicated to promoting the ways of a church denomination, or of a church's hierarchical structure, or a church's tradition. I tell myself that these symbols and traditions and ways of doing worship are well thought out and useful and something I can count on to endure. If Jesus showed up in my village with his ways and advice, I would probably be as confused as the struggling Nicodemus. Why are you trying to change things? Jesus, you are making life messy and uncertain.

And that is just one of the messages that the writer of the gospel of John intended. Think you have life figured out? – look again. Think you can see, hmmm, maybe not. Maybe you and I and Nicodemus are still in the dark. See, (no we probably don't – not fully) in the gospel of John there are levels and levels of messages to understand, levels and levels of ways of getting to know and trust God. The readings for the next few weeks will enrich our lives if we are willing to look deep, to look in new ways, to keep asking ourselves – How can these things be?

How can these things be? Jesus suggests to Nicodemus, and to us, that it is necessary to be born of the Spirit, or born from above, or born a second time. We have our life bound by flesh, the life that comes when a baby is born from the womb of their mother. And then, says Jesus, we have the life of heavenly things, the life that comes from a wild, uncontrollable Spirit that, using a line from the Romans reading, calls into existence the things that do not exist. It's a Spirit beyond our reason, it's a world beyond religious traditions and structures, it's a Spirit that comes to the godly and the ungodly, it is a world that can only be known if we are willing to see in new ways. This world of the Spirit ought to leave us scratching our heads with the same sort of confusion as that of Nicodemus. And it's a world that can excite, thrill, change, and expand our lives to include both earthly and the heavenly things.

In order to embrace this world of the Spirit, I suggest that we first must decline to be part of the religious world. I once read a sermon titled, "No Religion Here Today". That's what I think might be our motto – maybe our mission statement. Can you see that on our bulletins and web site and newsletter? The mission of St. Andrew's in the Pines is that there is no religion here.

You see, religion is what we make. Religion is what human beings create to attempt to move themselves closer to God. We set up rules for behavior, ways for worship, theological writings for understanding God, rituals and symbols to move us beyond ourselves into a place of awe. And that's ok only if we continue to understand that these are human efforts and part of those "earthly" things that Jesus challenges Nicodemus with getting stuck on. Then there are the things of the Spirit.

In my first theology class at seminary, one big assignment was to research and write a paper on a doctrine of the Christian church. Doctrines are the acceptable teachings of the church – there is a doctrine of creation, doctrine of baptism, doctrine of incarnation, and so on. I decided to write about the Holy Spirit. Fascinating but hard to do. I soon learned that there were very few theological writings about the Holy Spirit. How could one pronounce doctrine about a force, a spirit that can't be explained, contained, or tied up with words? What I did find was that the Holy Spirit has always made a mess for religious authorities.

One of the more troublesome aspects of the Holy Spirit is that it moves through people without religious distinctions. Why it has even been known to come to life in people that are not even part of the church!!! An unbeliever can receive a revelation or moment of grace and not even be baptized. This Holy Spirit isn't bound by church walls.

Early on in the development of the Christian church there came into existence a group known as the Montanists. They were filled with ecstatic utterances of the spirit. They danced and moaned and groaned and let women be their preachers and leaders and criticized unfolding rules and regulations about how to be a Christian. The "regularly" ordained bishops declared the group to be heretics and banned them from being known as Christian. And so it has been ever since. Those quakers and shakers and Pentecostal folks – they just confuse us religious folks.

I heard a story this week about an experience of a fellow Episcopalian. In her exercise class one day, two women began debating/arguing about a matter of religious doctrine. It had to do with the nature of evil. One woman was not part of any church denomination and the other was and both insisted that had the right understanding. My friend thought about entering into the discussion but didn't because, as she said, I'm an Episcopalian.

I think I understand what she meant – but I hope she didn't mean that anything goes and we don't stand for anything. Because we do have a foundation for our faith. We do base our choices and trust on a dependable, real, and loving God. We have a Nicene Creed that makes an attempt at capturing our faith foundation. So what I am hoping my friend meant is that Episcopalians, at their best, don't get tripped up by religion, by authoritative declarations by other human beings.

I think we accept that an incarnational faith – a faith that includes our bodies and our minds is just as complicated as it is to live as a human being. We accept a faith that lets us know that if the heart won't listen, words can't explain it. It is a faith that accepts that God calls into existence things that do not exist. There is mystery and more surrounding and guiding us that we can begin to imagine. We won't ever fully figure it out or capture it in doctrine. So, we must look to follow and trust a God whose freedom and presence and possibilities boggles our minds – and always will. And we can live with awe and wonder – asking, "How can these things be?" Show me Lord – I'll follow you, trust you, listen and learn, and will keep searching for the light. Your world is the real world.

No religion here today – just a world of faith.

Thanks be to God.