

“The Grace Question: Do You Not Understand These Things?”

John 3:1-21

The Gospel of John is the deepest, most profound of the 4 Gospels. Many Biblical scholars believe that it was the final Gospel written. Matthew, Mark, and Luke provide straightforward accounts of the life of Jesus. In John's Gospel we see more of the mystery of Jesus' life and ministry, the depth of His teachings and what they mean for us.

This exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus is a case in point. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a devout layman. Pharisees were scrupulous keepers of the letter of God's Law, but they were often completely oblivious to the spirit of the Law. So they would tithe every single thing they owned, down to the spices in their kitchens, and throw a widow out on the street because she got behind in her rent.

The Pharisees were Jesus' enemies. He was undermining their² authority and prestige with the people. During the three and a half years of His earthly ministry He would hold them up to ridicule, encouraging His hearers to do as they say but not as they do. The Pharisees joined with the Sadducees, scribes, and chief priests first to discredit Jesus and then to murder Him.

But the Holy Spirit has been at work in the heart of the Pharisee, Nicodemus. Nicodemus was also a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. He comes at night to speak with Jesus, perhaps out of fear of being seen with Him, perhaps because he wanted to speak with Jesus privately and away from the crowds that followed Him. He begins by stating that he recognizes Jesus as Someone special, Someone sent from God, on the basis of the miracles Jesus has performed.

Whereupon Jesus makes a profound statement that doesn't seem to be related to what Nicodemus has said. The only linkage is

that Nicodemus has spoken of Jesus coming from God and Jesus is ³ speaking of seeing the Kingdom of God.

It becomes immediately clear that Nicodemus does not have a clue what Jesus is talking about. Jesus statement about needing to be born again to see the Kingdom of God has thrown him. He has no context with which to understand Jesus' statement, and he makes some inane remark about entering back into one's mother's womb.

Jesus responds by explaining that He is speaking of a spiritual rebirth, a rebirth accomplished by water and the Spirit, a reference many feel means Holy Baptism. The term "born again" in Greek can equally be translated "born from above," which certainly can refer to Baptism. Jesus is talking about a change in a person's heart and faith that is so radical that it can only be accomplished by the Holy Spirit. IT is a 180 degree reorientation in a person's relationship with God, from that of enemy of God to friend of God, from unbelief to belief, from antagonism toward God to love of God. And it is impossible for any human being to effect that change in

themselves. Only the Holy Spirit has the power to change a person's heart that radically, that completely.

Nicodemus is understandably confused. Again, he has no background in his education for this kind of profound explanation of conversion. His theology is totally grounded in what a person has to do to be saved, the deeds and good works they must accomplish, the Laws of God they must keep perfectly. There is no room in the theology of the Pharisees for grace.

For that is what Jesus is talking about here: the grace of God: the underserved love and mercy of God for sinful people. It is the starting point of the plan of salvation. Without grace, there would be no salvation; without grace there would be hope.

It was God's grace that moved Him to choose to rescue us from the consequences of our sin rather than to simply write us off and abandon us to our fate. It was God's grace that moved Him to send His Son to be our Savior. It was God's grace that moved Jesus to become one of us, to live among us, and finally to suffer the humiliation of rejection, false trials, torture and crucifixion. And it

is by God's grace that we have His promise of forgiveness and eternal life as a free gift through faith in Jesus. Without grace we would be lost.

But Nicodemus does not understand. He does not understand because the religion of the Jews by the first century AD had become a dead, stilted thing. It was simply a prescription of laws, laws a person was doomed to be unable to obey perfectly. The Pharisees made a try at it. Of all people they probably came the closest to keeping the letter of the Law, but they failed miserably even at that, and failed even more miserably at keeping the spirit of God's law.

Jesus' response to Nicodemus' inability to understand is a telling one. He says, "You are Israel's teacher, and do you not understand these things?"

We might read a scathing indictment of the Pharisees in Jesus' question. They were supposed to be the best among the Jews. Other Jews looked up to them as being pious, religious, righteous. They themselves for the most part thought of themselves as several cuts above the average Jew – more pious, more devout, more

serious about their religion. In our terminology, I'm certain they considered themselves as having the inside track to heaven.

Jesus had nothing but contempt for them, because they had so totally misunderstood and, even worse, misrepresented to the people the kind of relationship God wanted to have with His chosen people.

So we may hear in Jesus' words an indictment of their arrogance, their false pride, their obnoxious pietism, and their grievous sin in leading the Jews down a false path.

It is a Biblical axiom that those who are chosen to be teachers and pastors in the Church will be held responsible for the souls entrusted into their care. In this, the Pharisees had failed and were failing miserably.

But Jesus' remarks also raise for us another reality. The truth is that there will always be things about our faith we do not and will not understand this side of heaven. Paul refers to the mysteries of our faith, things like Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, election and predestination. These are great mysteries about which there

will always be a certain part we will not understand before we stand in the presence of God in heaven.

Who can explain how God changes a person's heart in Holy Baptism, or plants the seed of faith in the heart even of an infant, as He (will do/did) in the heart of _____ right here today?

Who can describe the process by which simple bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus, in a real, but not fully comprehensible way in Holy Communion? And when we get to the mysteries of election and predestination we enter into waters so deep that even the brightest of us is in danger of drowning.

But that's okay. As I've said before to you, I don't want a God I understand completely. I don't want a God who is only as smart or as wise as I am. I need and want a God who is greater, wiser, smarter, and more powerful than I am. I need a God about whom there is some mystery, some things I just cannot and will not understand in this life.

Because there is much about life that is incomprehensible, difficult to understand or explain. I need a God who understands it,

who can protect me from its whims and vagaries, who can lead me⁸ through life's difficult and unfathomable moments.

When an earthquake and tsunami strikes, I don't need to understand the how and the why as much as I need a God who assures me that He will even work catastrophes to the good of those who love Him. When I experience the loss of a loved one, I don't need to comprehend the disease process that killed them or the physics of the car wreck that took their life as much as I need a God who assures me that He has defeated death and will bring them and me through it to eternal life. When I'm frightened of the future or the unknowns in life I don't need a professor who will describe for me the physiology of the fight or flight response. I need a God who comforts me by promising that He will walk with me even through the valley of the shadow of death.

There is much that is difficult to understand or incomprehensible about life and about God. The good news is, well..... the Good News. The way to heaven is so simple even the least intellectually gifted person can understand it: Jesus came into our flesh; He gave His life on the cross and took the punishment for

our sins; He stood in our place and suffered the death we deserved; and He rose victorious over death and promises forgiveness and eternal life as a free gift to all who trust in Him.

It's that simple. It's that profound. It may be hard for people to believe, but there is nothing difficult about the reality. And the Holy Spirit enables us to believe it. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:13-15: This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments,..."

After the Holy Spirit causes the rebirth within us and helps us to understand God's plan of salvation; after He enables us to trust in Jesus and not ourselves for life eternal, then He stays with us

throughout our lives to teach us, to help us to grow in our understanding of the mysteries of God.

Through the Word of God, the Spirit instructs our hearts and minds in the deep things of God. Through the Sacrament of Altar He grows us in understanding and the wisdom of God.

I may not completely understand the mystery of Holy Communion, but I believe I have grown in my understanding of it in the 48 years since I first received the Body and Blood of Jesus.

I do not completely understand how the Holy Spirit effects the miraculous change in a person's heart in Holy Baptism, but I know more about it and understand it better now than I did when the waters of Holy Baptism first flowed over my head 62 years ago.

I certainly do not fully comprehend the magnitude nor depth of God's love for me, but I appreciate it more deeply after a lifetime of perceiving it in events large and small in six decades of living.

There is another thing, however, that I still don't understand completely. How is it that so many Christians are content with a little faith? Why is it that so many Christians are happy to know and understand so much less about God and His workings in their lives than He would enable them to know if they made just a little effort? From where comes this crazy idea that once you complete Confirmation at the age of 13 or 14, your religious instruction and your Biblical studies are sufficient and done to carry you through all the experiences that await you in life? Why is it that Christians who wouldn't think of trying to put together one of their child's Christmas gifts or program their cell phone without reading the instructions or wouldn't think of taking a trip without consulting a map or going to mapquest will never consult God's Word before embarking on the journey of life?

I'm going to make a pretty bald You don't know enough about God. How can I say that? For this reason: I am reasonably certain that I study God's Word more than most of you and I know that I

don't know enough about God. Oh, I know enough to get to heaven. But I don't know as much as God would like me to know. I'm pretty sure I haven't learned a tenth of what God would like to teach me if I would just make myself more available to His instruction through His Word. And I know there is so much more I could learn to make my journey through this life easier and happier. And I'll bet most or all of you could say the same.

So, why not get started? Why not take this opportunity to resolve to be more open to God's instruction? Why not determine that you will read God's Word, study God's Word, hear God's Word more than you have ever done before? Come to Bible Study or Sunday School on Sunday morning. Set aside a time to be in God's Word each day. Do it alone, do it with your spouse, do it at work or at school with a co-worker or fellow student. Let the Spirit speak to your heart from His Word and see if your life isn't changed.