

“Idiota”

John 3: 1 – 10

Makemie Presbyterian Church

October 4, 2009 -- World Communion

### **John 3: 1 - 10**

<sup>3</sup>Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

<sup>2</sup>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.”

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

<sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time in the mother’s womb & be born?”

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

<sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

<sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

This ends the reading.

Of course my mom was in the car, the first time it happened. Her little grandson, strapped in his car seat yells at the driver that just swerved into our lane, “stupid idiot.” She looks over at me with eyebrow arched & says, “I see he’s been driving with his father.”

Trying to make light of it, I said to Jaxon. “Honey, we say, *idiota*, not stupid idiot.”

Calling someone, anything really, stupid just sets my teeth on edge. For example. We have a really smart dog, and her brother, who is, umm not as bright. Jaxon says to him, in a loving singsongy way, “stupid idiot, he’s so stupid.” And I find myself defending the dog. “He’s not stupid,” I say, he’s just sees things in his own way.” This always makes Jaxon laugh & roll his eyes.

And we say, I remind him, “Idiota.” A word from Latin.

More than calling something or someone stupid, I hate, feeling stupid. So the reading this morning from John's gospel is one of the most excruciating passages in all of scripture for me. And that confession should tell all you need to know about how much I hate feeling stupid. Every time I read about poor Nicodemus squirming like a worm in hot ash while Jesus explores the full depth of his ignorance I break out in a light sweat for him because I've been there.

January 2000, interview with the standing committee of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. represented by the Presbytery of Tampa Bay to determine my suitability for ordination. Question after question by a whole panel of distinguished minds intent on exposing holes in my doctrine, my theological education, my pastoral skills. I lobbed my answers back over the net & I was still in the game, when the chair of the committee leaned across the polished table, his eyes gleaming with intelligence & said: "Which Protestant divine has had the most influence on your own theology of the cross?"

My head swam, I thought I was going to faint, "Mark Twain", I said.

I hate not knowing. And so do you, or you would be at the Celtic festival, looking at the leaves as they change colors. So, I'm going to talk

about me for a couple of minutes with confidence that I'm also talking about some of you. I grew up believing that knowledge was the highest human virtue. My mother was determined that I would be raised on Shakespeare, Verdi & Van Gogh. When I turned seven I received from my mother, a stereo & to play on it: the Great Waltzes; Sleeping Beauty, The Danube waves, along with a collection of Debussy; Claire deLune & the like. While my friends were getting the Monkeys, "I'm a Believer" & the Beatles, "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." And I believe I've shared with you all the story of recovering from a serious bout of the flu when I was 9 years old & my dad giving me the complete set of Shakespeare to read.

"I can't read this daddy," I said. "I'm only 9." And he said, "Stretch."

I went to school the same way some people go to church. I learned history & geography. I learned science & literature. I got into a good college & I was living inside a little bubble of bliss. Until the day one of my friends got taken to the hospital. He had been starving himself to protest the Somalia-Ethiopian War in hopes of drawing attention to the atrocities being committed there. He was already thin, but that didn't matter. He was aware of the world around him in a way that I was not. He did not die. But a lot of other people did. As he lay in his clean white hospital bed we watched them on television. Soldiers falling backwards with their arms flung wide as

small corsages of blood bloomed on their chest. That's the year I started asking questions my academic advisor couldn't answer, such as, "Who are we? And why are we here? And why do such awful things happen? Is this all there is? Or is there something more to be hoped for?"

Everyone gets to such questions sooner or later. Philosophers call it the problem of existence. And as far as I know no one has solved it yet. My search for a solution led me to seminary & now 9 years in parish ministry.

But just last week the clerk at the Snow Hill post office said, "How are things in the religion business? Have you found an explanation for evil yet, or is Job still the best you can do."

I have to admit we haven't made much progress in the last twenty five hundred years. For most of us sitting here it's not the Somalia conflict but September eight years ago that shifted the search for meaning into higher gear. I wish that tragedy was not so often the gateway to transformation, but there it is. The threat of death, the stink & finality of it, can have a marvelously clarifying effect. All of sudden you realize you have more than enough information about things. What you need know is the kind of knowledge than can give you life.

Nicodemus was a seeker after that kind of knowledge. According to John's gospel he was already a really smart man. He was a Pharisee, John says, which meant he knew the ancient teachings of God inside & out. More than that, Nicodemus had devoted himself to practicing those teachings. In his own home he held himself to the same high standard as a priest in the temple. And he apparently did it in such a way that people looked up to him for it. He was a leader & a teacher of the people, John says. An honorable man. But for all of his character & ability, there was still something missing for Nicodemus. Something that sent him out under cover of night to meet with the rabbi from Galilee. We aren't told what kicked him into higher gear, but whatever it was it convinced him that he didn't know enough. That there was still something left for him to learn. He had an idea that Jesus might know what it was. But their interview was a disaster. They talked past each other so achingly. It was as if they were speaking different languages. Nicodemus asked questions that Jesus would not answer. While Jesus answered questions Nicodemus never asked.

"You must be born from above," Jesus told him. "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 born of the Spirit."

Some of us have heard that so often we even think we know what it means. It may be Christian writing, but it's Christian zen. That's why I feel so bad for Nicodemus. His grinding through his gears, trying to understand things that are far, far beyond all reason, until finally, his brain it just melts down, right there on the page, "How can these things be?" he says. And that's the last thing he says.

If you've ever been on the short end of an interview like that you know that Nicodemus was already low enough. He didn't need what Jesus says next to him, which was, "Are you a teacher of Israel? And yet you do not understand these things?"

Forever & ever, at least as long as I've been alive this passage has been interpreted as some kind of failure on Nicodemus' part. As if he should have understood such things. Or at least attempted an answer. "Ooh, I do understand, I do, just give me a minute, give me a minute. I get the part about the wind for sure, it's the born from above part I'm blocking on for some reason. If you just hang on for a minute, I'm sure the answer will come to me... Mark Twain.

What is it about human nature that craves a right answer? Whatever gave us the idea that we should be able to understand all things?

Especially things as high & holy as Jesus & Nicodemus are talking about. Not everything is reducible to words. Ever self respecting religion I know about teaches that there is a limit to human understanding.

In Exodus, the teaching comes directly from God to Moses, "You can not see my face, for no one shall see me & live." When Job demanded to know how God's mind worked, God let Job know just how much Job did not know. "Tell me where you were at the foundations of the earth. Tell me if you have understanding. Surely you know."

Paul of Taurus hit the wall when he was called up into "paradise & and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat" (2 Cor 12:1- 4). And in the words of today's reading, "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." We do not know.

In spite of everything I've been taught I no longer believe ignorance is a state to overcome. Instead I've come to believe it's a state to be sought. And yet we have this built in desire to know.

According to a German cleric who lived over 500 hundred years ago, Nicolaus of Cusa who wrote, I love this title, "Of Learn-ed Ignorance" there are at least three types of ignorance that turn up in those who seek God.

First there are those who don't know they don't know. This group is pretty easy to recognize because they speak of the highest things as easily as they speak of lunch meat or the weather. They're not baffled by much. They'll tell exactly what Jesus meant by being born from above and for 50 cents extra will sell you the keys to Daniel & Revelation. Because they trust in their own intelligence they are shut off from the wisdom of God. In their ignorance they believe they both know where the wind comes from & where it goes.

The second group of people know that they don't know but they think that means there is something wrong with them. They spend a lot of money on books & workshops with titles such as, "Discovering Divine Pulsation" & "The Science of Enlightenment." I have titles like that on my bookshelves. They memorize the 99 names of God & go on silent retreat, that brings them right to the brink of break through, but the brink turns out to be a solid kind of boundary, "no admittance" the sign says. And although there is something clearly divine burning in the distance their eyes are not sharp

enough to pick out a face. Their ears are not keen enough to discern a clear voice & they register this as failure & defeat. They do not know where the wind comes from or where it goes but they think they should.

The third group of people in Nicolaus' writing knows that they don't know & receive this ignorance as God's celestial gift. It doesn't douse their desire to learn anymore than it shuts down their thirst for God. But it does shift them into a higher gear. The knowledge of God is no longer what they are after. It is God they want, & God alone. They've come to accept the only solution to the problem of existence is to go on living, as fully & as gracefully as they know how. In their state of illumined ignorance they live in a state of perpetual wonder, where no human certainty diminishes God's mystery. And no mortal expertise, cramps God's own style. They do not know where the wind comes from, they do not know where the wind goes, but that doesn't trouble them because they trust that God does.

Nicolaus called himself an *idiot*. Socrates said, "I know that I do not know."

If you ask me what Nicodemus found out in his interview with Jesus was he was an *idiot*, too. And those of you who remember your Latin know that the word doesn't mean just plain dumb.

It means you're smart enough to know what you don't know. And I think, that's the gift Nicodemus was given when his brain melted down. He found the ignorance that was uniquely his own; so that he never had to feel stupid again.

But also & more importantly – that we may bond over our not knowing for such holy ignorance promises to lead us together past all our treasure houses of knowledge about God into the knowledge of God, who alone can give us life.