

**Sermon for March 8, 2020 – “Clean Hearts”**  
Second Sunday of Lent, Year A – Text: Psalm 51, John 3:1-17  
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There’s not a lot said about Nicodemus in the Bible but there’s much to learn from the little that’s mentioned. In fact, as one author, Ellen Gould White writes, “In the interview with Nicodemus Jesus unfolded the plan of salvation and His mission to the world. In none of His subsequent discourses did He explain so fully, step by step, the work necessary to be done in the hearts of all who would inherit the kingdom of heaven.” This is quite a statement if you stop to think about it. “In none of His subsequent discourses did He explain so fully…” And this is absolutely correct! So, it seems to me since inheriting the kingdom of heaven is our goal it would be important to study this interview carefully to see – as Ellen White suggests what this necessary work is exactly. Now, there’s a lot here but I’m only going to focus on one small portion to illustrate the necessary first step that’s often missing from the lives of many professed Christians. This first step is crucial because without it there are no others.

Nicodemus held a high position in Jewish society. He was highly educated. He was a Pharisee. A leader. A member of the Sanhedrin the local governing body. As we know Pharisees were really good at keeping rules. They were highly religious, pious men who knew the Scriptures like we know the alphabet. They were men who intentionally tried to be good though sometimes, as Mark Twain said they were “good in the worst sense of the word.” So our boy Nick here was a strict Pharisee filled with at least in **his** mind good works serving the Lord freely and generously. What more could he do or be? He had all the bases covered seemingly secure in his salvation. He had it all together. Just like we sometimes think we do – don’t we? Yet it’s clear from the interview he had with Jesus that he was lacking something. But, as Jesus says in Matthew, **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven but only he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly ‘I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers!’”** Wow – okay – how do we avoid that?

Well, let’s see, let’s continue on with our story of Nicodemus. It’s late. The night is peaceful and quiet. Here comes Pharisee Nicodemus to visit Jesus. See him looking one way and then another making sure the coast was clear. He does not want to be seen. Maybe he should have thought twice about this visit. This could be a huge mistake for him. According to John’s gospel Jesus had just turned the temple upside down chasing out the merchants and the marketers who had been turning God’s temple into a strip mall. Jesus’ actions were not well-received by the powers that be. “What do you think you’re doing?” they say, “Who do you think you are? What sign can you show us for doing these things?” “A sign?” asked Jesus. “I’ll give you sign, **‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’**” A curious remark. But that aside, if Jesus had any hope of getting in good with the Jewish leaders I’d say He blew that with His actions that day. This was **not** going to be a cordial relationship.

So here comes Nick at night – to see Jesus. Who knows why? I’m guessing it was because he didn’t want his Sanhedrin buddies catching him with Jesus thus ruining the reputation he’d spent a lifetime building. Jesus welcomed him and the conversation begins. Composed and collected, Nicodemus greets Jesus with the typical kissing-up of most politicians, “**Rabbi, we know that You’re a teacher who comes from God for no one can do these signs that You do apart from the presence of God.**” Picture it. Nicodemus is in control; well, actually it’s more like he **perceives** he’s in control. In fact, he probably has the whole conversation planned out in his head. You know what that’s like. You have something to say, you know how you will say it and you’re fairly certain of how they’ll react. That’s Nicodemus’ situation. Well, here’s where the story gets interesting because Nicodemus’ well-laid plans don’t work out. Jesus neither responded to Nicodemus’ compliment nor returned it. He cuts right to the heart of the matter, “**Very truly, I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.**” Or, as some translations say, “born again.” “I’m sorry – do **what** now?” Being the legalist and literalist that he was, Nicodemus was dumfounded. Jesus might well have said, “ $2 + 6 = 23$ .” So Nicodemus asks a clarifying question, maybe laced with a bit of sarcasm, “Born again? That’d be a trick! How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” “It’s a Holy Spirit-thing,” explains Jesus. “You can’t get into the kingdom without a radical restructuring of your life. Baptism’s a symbol of that; that your life is under new management. You’re not in charge and your rules and laws aren’t in charge. The Spirit’s in charge and, like the wind it will lead you where it wants you go.” Nicodemus just shakes his head, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered, “Come on now, you’re a teacher of the law and you don’t understand these things? You don’t want to understand...do you? If you don’t understand the easy stuff how will you understand the harder stuff? But hang in there. The Son of Man is going to be lifted up just like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. Remember that story? Whoever understands **that** and believes in **Him** will have eternal life.” Jesus then goes on to say something about God’s love, sending His Son into the world so that those who believe won’t perish but have eternal life. He says something about God wanting to save the world through His Son and that those who don’t believe in Him are condemned already. Clear words. Strong words. Words of life.

I’m guessing this is **not** where Nick expected this conversation to go. I’m guessing it also caught him more than a little off guard. Wait—what? I’m a strict Pharisee – now I’m not good enough? What just happened? The truth probably hit him like a two-by-four and the truth hurts – doesn’t it? Sure, but it seems to me that the only thing wounded that night was Nicodemus’ pride. Let’s think about this for a moment. Because while the truth hurts we all know that the truth will set you free! And as the Book of Proverbs (16:18) reminds us, “**Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.**” So this is more than important for us...this is crucial!

Think about the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount at the beginning of chapter 5 of Matthew. Most of us can probably recite them by heart. **“Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are the meek...Blessed are those who hunger and thirst “...for righteousness...”** These are mirrored in Psalm 51, which we just read together. **“Create in me a pure heart, O, God and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”** Do you see the common thread there? It’s humility of heart, an admission of need, a desire for righteousness. Were these attitudes valued and exhibited by the Pharisees? Not if I read my Bible correctly. In fact, most Pharisee’s thoughts were like the one in the Temple praying, **“God, I thank You that I am not like other people even like this tax collector.”** Jesus repeatedly calls them hypocrites and is never shy in pointing out their hypocrisy. He says to them over and over, **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!”** No wonder Jesus’ statement hit Nicodemus with such force. **“Very truly, I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”**

Now let’s fast forward to the Book of Revelation to the message to the church at Laodicea. **“I know your works...you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ‘For you say I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’”** Ouch – pretty scathing, yes? Next it says **“You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.”**

We’ll talk about spiritual blindness in a few weeks but for now do we see how this all fits.

The author I mentioned earlier, Ellen Gould White puts it this way, “We may have flattered ourselves as did Nicodemus that our life has been upright that our moral character is correct and think that we need not humble the heart before God like the common sinner. But when the light from Christ shines into our souls we shall see how impure we are. We shall discern the selfishness of motive the enmity against God that has defiled every act of life. Then we shall know that our own righteousness is indeed as filthy rags and that the blood of Christ alone can cleanse us from the defilement of sin and renew our hearts in His own likeness.” What about us? We’re okay – right? Maybe but probably not.

So, what can this teach us during Lent? What must we do? Psalm 51 holds the key. We must seek clean hearts – open and receptive so that we may embrace the many ways God is present with and for us. We must seek clean hearts, cleared of the rubble of old battles with ourselves and others. We must seek clean hearts purified through the daily encounters that take us beyond our egos and our need for control toward being a blessing to others and allowing others to be a blessing to us. We must seek clean hearts, freed from the clutter of cultural temptation so that we can enjoy life’s simple things and relish the God’s gifts so easily taken for granted. We must seek clean hearts, bathed from harsh thoughts, racism and prejudice drawing us toward others, warmly welcoming others with a nonjudgmental embrace.

We must seek clean hearts scrubbed free of frantic busyness, creating time to listen for the still, small voice of God in the sacred space of solitude and silence. We must seek clean hearts rinsed clear of false messages about our identity, enabling our inner goodness and light to shine through all we are and do. We must seek clean hearts, cleansed of anxiety and lack of trust, restoring enduring faith in God's abiding presence and unconditional love. We must seek clean hearts washed with God's mercy and strengthened by His love helping us move beyond ourselves becoming the people and church we've been created to be. Lent is the time to ask God to create clean hearts within us; to dust off the unmindful activity that constantly collects there; to de-clutter our hearts from harsh judgments and negativity; to wash away our resistance to working through difficult relationships; to wipe away the tarnish so the beauty of generous and kind hearts can shine forth; to remove whatever keeps us from following in Jesus' footsteps.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.