

The Intensely Individual Ministry of Jesus

May 18, 2008

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Jesus spent such a large part of His short ministry among crowds. There were Galilean masses that swirled around him “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt. 9:36) absorbing virtually all the healing and teaching he could give them, on the mountains and on the plains. There was the feeding of the five thousand (Mt. 21:8-9), as well as the bloodthirsty assembly that called for his execution only days later (Mt. 27:22-23). It could rightly be said of most of these throngs that they were very ordinary folk, people of the land. They were the hoi polloi, the peasantry. Not many people listed in the Social Register of Judea would be found among their numbers.

But all that changed one evening in Jerusalem. The ministry of Jesus moved from one primarily among the crowds to one that was intensely individual. It moved from the unnamed *people of the land* to attention on an urban aristocrat named Nicodemus. It moved from dealing with the disreputable, tax collectors and sinners, to dealing with one of the most upstanding citizens in all of Israel. Worth noting in any case, whether the poor or the rich,

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Jesus was Jesus. He wasn't trying to be one way with some of the people and another way with others. He was himself. When you find your identity in God, you don't have to derive it from other people, and how refreshing that is.

But, back to the story. Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus at all? Here is a ruler of the Jews, a member of the Jewish **Supreme Court**, a guardian of Jewish orthodoxy, coming to meet with a homeless prophet and one-time carpenter who most likely spoke with an accent. No wonder he tiptoes out the back door, rolls the car down the driveway with the motor and headlights off, and has a rendezvous with Jesus by the light of the moon. Given the situation, how could he have done otherwise? But come he does, and to seek out Jesus, for whatever reason, is one of the first acts of discipleship in the Gospel of John (Jn 1:37, 46).

So, we're back to the question, *why did he come to Jesus?* Maybe he wanted to see the *signs* attributed to this new age prophet. Maybe he wanted to get a spiritual high. There is another possible answer, one that strikes a nerve in our culture

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that worships salvation *through success*, what the late great Henri Nouen calls the *filled, yet unfulfilled* life. (“Making All Things New, 1981) That is, Nicodemus comes to Jesus because he is empty in his fullness. He is lost in his religious respectability. He comes to Jesus because he has made it to the top and the top wasn’t what he thought it would be. The walls of his study are covered with the sacraments of success....all kinds of degrees and post-graduate degrees, citations and commendations from all sorts and conditions of prominent societies and service organizations. What he has sacrificed of himself on the treadmill of success, believing that it could and would make him, at long last feel like *somebody*, has turned up as empty as a Church on Monday morning.

So, defying all social correctness, his upbringing, his prejudices, he comes to Jesus and repents. In coming to Jesus, Nicodemus will be asked to let go of what he knows, in order to take in, and then build his life upon what Jesus has to give. What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is that only a *radical* change, an experience of God that can only be described as a *second birth*

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will do, an infusion of God's DNA into himself. To his everlasting credit, Nicodemus does not bolt and run. He is confused, he is uncertain, but he remains and he remains teachable. And, when Jesus died, Nicodemus was there to donate a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes to anoint the dead body (Jn.19:39). I doubt very much if Nicodemus would have had the courage to perform such an extravagant act of love for a figure so publicly disgraced, *unless* something of the "birth from above" had taken hold in him that night in Jerusalem.

So, Nicodemus is a representative figure, *not* just of ruling Judaism, but of us, achievement, performance driven religious people everywhere who long for rebirth by the spirit, while at the same time clinging like mad to remain justified by what we do.

Abraham Lincoln is said to have once remarked, *I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.* Throughout the Gospels, the ones who experience the rebirth by *water and the Spirit* are the ones

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who come to Jesus with something of this kind of radical, driven-to-their-knees openness. They are the ones, regardless of theological aptitude or moral correctness, who experience the *nowness* of the second birth. It is the ones who, like Nicodemus in the moonlight, come to Jesus for the spiritual reality that the human heart seeks, but that the mind, conditioned by the world, steadfastly resists.

AMEN.