

A Passionate Servant of Christ

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a six-part series

September 11, 2011

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John 3:1-3 (NRSV)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

John 7:45-52 (NRSV)

⁴⁵Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, “Why did you not arrest him?” ⁴⁶The police answered, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” ⁴⁷Then the Pharisees replied, “Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? ⁴⁸Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? ⁴⁹But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed.” ⁵⁰Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, ⁵¹“Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” ⁵²They replied, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.”

John 19:38-42 (NRSV)

³⁸After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴²And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

We remember. We honor.

And we strengthen our resolve to become the people God has called us to be.

9/11. We all remember where we were. The disbelief. The shock. The horror. We couldn't get our heads and hearts around such a monstrous attack. The images were numbing in their power. The numbers were powerful in their starkness. 3,000 dead, including 343 NYFD firefighters who ran *into* the doomed buildings.

Dan Smith, our staff media guru, found several videos for us to consider using during our remembrance of 9/11. One stood out. You'll see it during the service. It is entitled, “Why We Remember.” One portion in particular stood out for me:

“To remember is to honor; to honor is to value. What we value shapes who we become.”

For me, and probably for most us, September 11 was a singular experience, a life-changing event, all other moments marked out as either “before” or “after.” It caused us to reflect on who we are, who we want to become.

This is no less true for a church than for a person. It seems fitting that this remembering of 9/11 would be the occasion when we begin to talk about what it is we really value and who we, the people of St. Andrew, want to become.

To some degree, the question of who we ought to become is answered for us by Jesus. We are to be his disciples, reaching out to all the globe, baptizing in his name. Too often though, we say these words on Sunday and then leave them hanging in the air until the next time we gather. It doesn't have to be this way. We can do more, be more.

Passion

A couple of decades ago, Leo Buscaglia wrote an oddly named book, *Bus 9 to Paradise*. It was a book about passion. His premise was simple. To lead fulfilling and happy lives, we need a passion, something that gets us up every morning, excited to discover what the new day holds. For Buscaglia, it wasn't important what we are passionate about, only that we have a passion in life. We could go from one passion to another. The nature of the passion was not the point – it was simply having one.

I've always thought there was a lot of truth in Buscaglia's premise. Passion turns the world from black-and-white into full, living color. It is like the moment when Dorothy steps out of her house into Oz. Or the movie, *Pleasantville*, if you remember it.

I don't know if you have passions in your life, but here's the question for us all. Do we have a genuine passion for Jesus? Yes, we are Christians; but are we *passionate* Christians? We are disciples, but are we *passionate* disciples? Are we *passionate* believers? Are we *passionate* servants of our Lord?

Merriam –Webster's defines "passionate" this way:

"capable of, affected by, or expressing intense feeling"

I am certainly passionate about my wife and my family. But how passionate am I about Jesus, about the God who made me, about the salvation that Jesus has brought me? And if I claim passion, would anyone see it in me? These are hard questions to ask yourself, but they are the right questions.

What's on the opposite end of the spectrum from a passionate servant of Christ? I suppose we could say non-believer or non-Christian, but that certainly wouldn't speak to many of us at St. Andrew. But how about this: "Christianish"? When I first saw this word in Kenda Creasy Dean's book, *Almost Christian*, I was struck by the fact that though I had never heard the word before I still had a pretty good idea what she meant by it. And I had a pretty strong suspicion that I had spent much of my life more Christianish than Christian.

But more of that for next week. For now, let's consider a man who moved from being curious about Jesus to genuine passion. His story is told in John's gospel.

Curious

Nicodemus was a Pharisee¹ and a leader of the Jews. An important man. A man with much to protect. He had heard the strange story of how a man from Nazareth, named Jesus, had changed water into wine during a large wedding party in Cana (John 2:1-12). And Nicodemus knew that Jesus was the cousin of that wild man, John, who had been baptizing people out at the Jordan River. But Nicodemus' world had been rocked during the most recent Passover Festival in Jerusalem. There, this Jesus from Nazareth had charged into the temple courtyards one morning, turning over tables and generally disrupting the sacrificial industry² for a short while (John 2:13-22). In the days following, Jesus had astounded people with healings and other miracles. He had taught with an authority beyond that even claimed by the Pharisees. "Who is he?" the crowds asked.

Nicodemus wondered himself; he was both curious and perplexed. He decided to approach Jesus, seeking some sort of explanation. But Nicodemus couldn't just walk up to him. A Pharisee had a reputation to protect and, already, some of the Pharisees were talking about

¹The Pharisees were an important group of Jews for nearly two centuries before the destruction of the temple in 70AD. The Pharisees were committed to the careful keeping of God's Law and waited, with great anticipation, for the coming of the Messiah, God's kingdom, and the bodily resurrection of the dead. In their religious lives, some Pharisees followed a path of piety while others pursued political, even revolutionary, agendas.

²The temple in Jerusalem was the centerpiece of the Jewish religion. During Passover, the great celebration of liberty and salvation, the temple and its courtyards were turned into a charnel house as thousands of Jews came to purchase animals that would then be slaughtered by the temple priests in sacrificial rituals.

the need to confront Jesus. Fearing the consequences of a meeting with Jesus, Nicodemus took the safe route. He went to Jesus at night -- so no one would know.³

There, Nicodemus sat in front of Jesus looking only ever more confused. Born a second time? Born from above? Blowing wind and the kingdom of God? What is Jesus talking about? Crazy talk. I know the Scriptures inside and out, Nicodemus thought to himself. None of this is making any sense! Jesus had even taken him to task, wondering how Nicodemus could possibly be a teacher of the people if he didn't understand what Jesus was saying. Bewilderment and insults – that pretty much summed it up. Nicodemus left his meeting with Jesus as perplexed and confused as when he arrived.

Defender

Fast forward . . . now the Temple police, having been sent by the chief priests and Pharisees to arrest Jesus, have returned empty-handed. No Jesus in custody. The Jewish leaders are incensed and ask the police why they failed to do the priests' bidding. The leaders are mad at the police, the crowds, and all who seem the least bit sympathetic to Jesus.

When the anger of the chief priests and Pharisees is at its most fierce, Nicodemus, part of this inner circle, steps forward. He poses a simple question: Must there not be a hearing before an arrest?

Even for this very modest defense of Jesus, Nicodemus is mocked and ridiculed by his peers. "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?" The sarcasm drips from their mouths as they instruct Nicodemus to go back and study the Scriptures more carefully. He'll see that no prophet is to come from Galilee, as has this particular Jesus.

Nicodemus, though, is being changed. He may have been bewildered by Jesus' teaching, but in the midst of confrontation and chaos, he is drawn to defending the man . . . and suffering for it.

Passionate

Fast forward again . . . Jesus lies dead, his body taken down from the cross. Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish Council, has asked for and received permission to lay Jesus to rest. The body will be taken to a new tomb that belongs to Joseph.

And Nicodemus, who had served Jesus in life by defending him, now serves him in death. Nicodemus brings over 75 pounds of expensive and fragrant myrrh and aloes. The amount that he brought for Jesus is astounding, an amount suitable for a royal burial. We can only imagine its cost and the sacrifices that such an outlay represented.

It is impossible for any of us to peer inside anyone else's heart. Most of us have trouble discerning the state of our own heart, much less someone else's. Such understanding is God's alone. Yet, we can look at someone's behavior, their actions, and probably discern something their aims.

With the three brief incidents in Nicodemus' life recounted by John, we can safely say that we see a transformation in the man. Once probably hostile to Jesus, Nicodemus moved to curiosity and life-upsetting bewilderment, then on to active defense of this humble carpenter from the no-account village of Nazareth. Finally, though powerless to stop the horrifying and unjust trajectory of that Friday in Jerusalem, Nicodemus stepped forward to do what he can. I'm not much of a betting man, but I'd sure bet that on that Friday Nicodemus' heart overflowed with passion for Jesus, even as her served his Lord one last time. What else could explain his actions? Wouldn't you love to know what role Nicodemus went on to play in the years after? What can such passion and commitment accomplish when it is unleashed?

³Obviously, I'm using a little informed imagination to flesh out the portrait of Nicodemus. Also, every time John refers to "night" in his gospel, it is a reference to spiritual darkness. Nicodemus is living in the darkness until he comes to confront the light that is Jesus.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Arthur Jones has written the curricula for the *Christianish* Connection Group series. Here are some of the questions the groups will be talking about this week:

1. Discuss the word “Christianish.” What do you think it means? What emotions do you feel when you first heard the word? Did the sermon this week challenge you or change your thoughts about the word?
2. Discuss this question: “What is the point of passionately serving Christ if being Christianish will do the same thing?”
 - a. Do we believe that being Christianish will do the same thing?
 - b. Do others believe that being Christianish will do the same thing?
 - c. Keeping in mind that when we talk about the Christianish, we always are talking about ourselves, when do we, by our actions, indicate a willingness to be content with Christianish?
3. We believe that God has been calling each of us for all of our lives. God told Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” God has been showing you love since before you were born. He is offering you love now.
 - a) In what ways has God shown you love?
 - b) In what ways are you called to show love to others?
 - c) How can we make the church a place where this love is shown? How can we help the church call the Christianish to become Passionate Servants of Christ?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Psalm 34 Praise of God for deliverance from trouble	Tuesday, Psalm 23 A psalm of trust in God, our shepherd-king.
Wednesday, John 3:1-19 The full story of Nicodemus' visit to Jesus in the night.	Thursday, John 7 The confrontation between Jesus and the leaders grows and Nicodemus comes to Jesus' defense.
Friday, Luke 14:25-33 Being a disciple of Jesus is not a job for the half-hearted.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott's Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

We have just begun a new study of the gospel of John.

Join us whenever you can.

This is very “drop-in.” Bring a lunch if you like.

Bring a study Bible.

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**Scott Engle is leading a trip to the Holy Land in the fall of 2011.
60 St. Andrew folks are going! There are still a few places open.**

In addition to Israel, we will visit the Pyramids, Ephesus, Athens, and Rome. It will be quite an experience. There is still time to join us.

For more information, go to www.scottengle.org.

You can also e-mail Scott at sengle@standrewumc.org.