

On Thursday afternoon, our family of three loaded up the car for a quick roadtrip to Huntsville, Alabama to visit Mark's family. As you might imagine, we've made this trip many, many times— a visit whose travel time was much shorter when we lived in Nashville, but from our house now takes about 4 hours. About 2 years and a half ago, when we first dared to make this journey with a newborn baby, it took a little longer than that. We were sticklers to our feeding schedule and got her out of her infant car seat often for diaper changes and breaks. Lots of stops.

This past Thursday, we made it in 4 hours flat. No stops. We picked up Josie right around nap time, after a morning of playing hard and a big lunch. Car was packed— with much less, mind you, than any previous family trip we've taken. We hit the road, expecting and hoping that she would conk out for at least half the drive. She slept for maybe 35 minutes before she woke up and began asking questions — most of which centered on or built upon one question. Any one who's ever ridden in a car with a toddler or small child already knows the question I'm talking about... "Are we there yet?" Or, in Josie's case, "Are we at Oma's house now?"

"No, Josie, remember it takes a long time to get to Oma's house so we'll be in the car for a while."

"Why?"

And after a short cycle of attempting to offer science and reasoning to a toddler, we landed with, "It just does."

Mark and I looked across the console at each other, acknowledging the rite of passage, this point of no return, knowing that "Because I said so" is just right around the corner, waiting to brand us as official parents from now until the end of time. And while we know it will wear us down to the core and test our patience on a daily basis, this sense of wondering and questioning is what we want for our growing and rapidly developing child. We want her to trust us with her questions, to know that it is okay to not know and want to know new things.

In the spirit of welcoming questions, we turn to the gospel of John to read together the story of Nicodemus. Listen for a word from God from John 3:1-17.

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus[a] 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 unless God is with that person." 3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." [b] 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be

astonished that I said to you, ‘You[c] must be born from above.’[d] 8 The wind[e] 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.” 9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

11 “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you[f] do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.[g] 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.[h]

16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

In John’s gospel, this story takes place very early in Jesus’ ministry. John the Baptist has testified that Jesus is the chosen one about whom he has

prophesied. Jesus has begun to call disciples. He has turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana, the first of his signs, revealing his glory and strengthening the faithfulness of his first followers. Next, he overturns tables and drives the money changers out of the temple, foretelling his own death and resurrection when challengers ask him to perform a sign. Chapter 2 ends with a note that while Jesus was in Jerusalem during Passover, many were coming to believe in him after seeing him do these “signs”. John’s writer goes on to say “But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone, for he himself knew what was in everyone.”

This brings us right up to the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus - Nicodemus, who, according to the verse that directly precedes this story, Jesus knew. He knew who he was, he knew his fears, the things that motivated him to come to Jesus in the night and have this conversation. He knew that Nicodemus had a lot of questions and was, perhaps, feeling unsteady upon hearing about this Jesus of Nazareth, all the amazing things he had been doing and the ways people were speaking about him, comparing his arrival to the prophecies of old, and beginning to follow him. Nicodemus, we learn, is an educated man, a teacher of Israel and a leader among the Jews in Jerusalem. He’s probably used to being the one receiving visitors with doubts and questions— not the one making these visits, not the one seeking clarity.

But there's something different about this Jesus and Nicodemus is likely recognizing that what he is bringing is something new, something different—inviting people to follow in a way that will challenge all of the traditions and structures and legality on which Nicodemus has hung his educated hat. He's curious -- and he has enough trust in Jesus to be vulnerable and approach him in this way. It's often noted that Nicodemus comes to talk to Jesus at night — and lots of people interpret this to be because he's ashamed or secretive in making this visit. He doesn't approach Jesus in the light of day, when Jesus is out and about in public spaces. And maybe there is an element of shame or fear in raising questions that a leader and teacher should already know the answers to. Or perhaps he hoped that he'd catch Jesus for a more one-on-one conversation after the crowds of the day had ceased. Maybe what Nicodemus was really seeking was not answers, but connection -- maybe he desired to be in the presence of Jesus, to grow and deepen in his own faith.

Jesus, particularly in the gospel of John, is the master of answering the question with another question. He is cryptic and thought-provoking with his response to Nicodemus— perhaps confusing him even further with this talk of rebirth. Nicodemus takes a very literal interpretation, asking how that would even physically work to be born again. Jesus is talking about being born of the Spirit, and thus calling Nicodemus into a way that is not his own — a way that names that the kingdom of heaven is far from what we would find familiar here on earth. Jesus does not shy away from

calling out the irony of Nicodemus's lack of understanding -- that he, an educated man and community leader, can't grasp even the simple, earthly things that Jesus is saying. He names that misunderstanding, that confusion — but Jesus does not reject him for it. Jesus receives him. He may not give him the clear answers he's looking for, but Jesus meets him where he is. He is kind, loving, and understanding of Nicodemus.

Today is Trinity Sunday — a day of worship devoted to the celebration of God's complexity and vastness. Three beings in one. Creator, redeemer, sustainer. Parent, son, and Spirit. God's great love reaching us in the unique ways the world needs it. If the concept of the Trinity makes your head spin, you're not alone. This is doctrine that Christians have been sorting out since the 1st century. In 325 AD, Constantine decided that this question of the relationship between the Creator God and Jesus must be resolved once and for all. He asked bishops from churches all over the world to gather at Nicea and hash it out. Most of these initial debates were intense and centered around how the Son differed from the Father, if he was inferior— if they were of the same substance or of a similar substance. It sounds like a discussion section of a seminary systematic theology class and I don't mean that in a good way. At last, the bishops voted about the relationship of God the Father to God the Son, then, a half-century later, gathered as a second ecumenical council in Constantinople to deal with the Holy Spirit. The trinitarian theology of the Nicene Creed, which we will read

together today as we affirm our faith, is a theology that affirms the one-ness of God — Father is God, Son is God, Holy Spirit is God, but they are one God. Three expressions of the divine substance of one Holy God.

The Trinity is such a historically hot topic of debate because scripture doesn't lay it out for us clearly. Sure, we have plenty of stories about God, Jesus, and Spirit — but the relationship between them and what that means for our own theologies is where we are left with lots of questions. In today's story from John's gospel, Jesus actually touches on all three members of the Trinity, using language that emphasizes the relational nature that connects them. Nicodemus struggles to sort it all out. Theology of the trinity is not the only thing that he — and all of us — grapple to understand. And like Nicodemus, we are not rejected or condemned at the confession of our imperfect grasp on who God is and what God is doing in these stories of scripture and in our world today.

But Nicodemus didn't have centuries of church debate, established creeds, or a Sunday dedicated to the mysteries of the relational nature of God. Instead, he's a wise man, an old man, wondering what this obviously gifted and blessed teacher means by losing all that hard won wisdom and life experience to go back to birth, back to the start. And let's not forget, Nicodemus is also a leader and teacher in a monotheistic religion *surrounded* by polytheistic cultures, so he's probably extra wary of what all this talk he's heard from Jesus could imply. How can two things, or even three things, be

doing the work of the one God? So here he is, showing up at night to ask Jesus in this quiet space what all of this is supposed to mean. And Jesus gives him the ultimate teacher answer: It's this, and it's that. It's this, and also this. It's this, plus, that, plus this. Jesus is telling him this is new wisdom, and it's complex. It's the nature of God and the whole point of this Jesus-endeavor wrapped into one conversation. It's bound to be confusing and worthy of Nicodemus' questions and our own.

In our public life of faith, we do not always do a great job of leaving room for questions, or for doubt. We all have those questions and doubts, we wonder how certain things can happen - - we have all put our heads in our hands and wondered where God is in the midst of so much pain in this world. Questions are a part of our faith. Questions help us to deepen our relationships to God — because God, in Jesus, does not reject or condemn us in those moments of confessed doubt or confusion. I believe God wants us to ask questions — to seek more deeply the love and the call of Jesus, to push the borders of what our minds thought was big enough for God and realize that God's love and mercy is even wider than we can grasp. I believe God wants so badly to be in real relationship with us that God welcomes those conversations when we challenge, and push back, and say, "I'm not so sure about that."

Last week, our church welcomed 9 new members as the 2024 Confirmation Class affirmed their baptismal vows and joined the church. They worked, not in isolation, but in community with their mentors, parents,

and youth leaders to write personal statements of faith. I hope you got a chance to read some of them at the reception following worship last week. Writing a statement of faith, asserting personal belief and theology about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is not easy. But these confirmands showed up to the task, they showed authenticity and vulnerability, and they shared their growing faith with us, their church. There are still a lot of questions — thanks be to God — about who God is and how God is also Jesus and also the Spirit and what all of that means to us, the church. I pray that we will receive our newest members and all the questions they may have (and will have) with great love and encouragement, with sincere conversation and compassion, naming and affirming that it is okay to not have all the answers— that we don't have all the answers, and we don't have to.

There will always be lots of questions. There will be theological debate. There will be doubt. Jesus reminds us that, whatever we are wrestling with, we can bring it to him. He is our friend, our gentle good shepherd, calling us closer and welcoming us just as we are.

All of this points to love. We see that in the final verses of our text today, as Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus comes to a close. God, who is vast and impossible to contain, who is doing something in our midst that we may not understand, who meets us where we are — is doing all of it in the name of love. How often do we sell ourselves short by quoting the 16th verse in asserting the promises of God's great love for us,

sending God's son to save us. Keep reading for a crucial reminder that God did this not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

We are far from perfect creatures, we do not treat each other as we should. We have more sins to confess weekly than we can fit into our corporate prayer. We may grapple — and I hope we do — with big questions of faith. We may struggle to wrap our heads around the ins and outs of what we claim to believe when we profess our faith. We are all like Nicodemus, and while what Jesus said to him is complicated, the point is simple: God who created this vast, complex world, full of questions and unknowns... God, who created us — also very complex, and full of questions — did so out of great, great love for us, that we might experience great, great, love through Christ, and follow in his way, led by the Spirit to share great, great love with the world.