

“Nicodemus and the Spirit of Inquiry”

John 3:1-17

This morning we have the rare privilege of confirming seven bright and energetic young people as they make a formal profession of faith and become full members of Westminster Presbyterian Church. These young people have attended classes taught by Rob and Linda, with some cameo appearances by Jill and myself. The curriculum included the Bible, the Book of Order, the Book of Confessions, the sacraments, church history, and other important subjects. These students can now answer any questions on any of those subjects that anyone wants to ask them! On several Sundays they attended worship and their regular class session followed by a light lunch and an extended session that lasted until 2:00. They have done some hands-on mission work, serving meals at the Salvation Army Miracle Kitchen. They have interacted with mentors and teachers, written faith statements and made their own confirmation stoles. Along the way they have asked questions, expressed both beliefs and doubts, and wondered about many things.

I have several things I would like to say this morning, and very little time in which to say it, given all that we are doing today. So I will keep it brief. The first thing I want to say is addressed to the congregation, and that is that we should feel very fortunate to have these young people in our congregation. Like the ivory billed woodpecker, the species *active teen-age Presbyterian*, is considered by some to be extinct. In a good number of churches in our denomination there has not been a sighting for many years. We should all be thrilled this morning that we have these seven young people here at Westminster. We should all make an effort to get to know them, learn their names, talk to them, let them know that we are glad that they are here. That is the first thing.

Next, I want to say several things to the young people themselves. First, I want to say to them that we think that this congregation has something to offer them, that they will be enriched by being here. But the other side of that is that they have something to contribute to this congregation. We need their energy and their ideas, their curiosity and their imagination. Just by their very presence with us they are contributing. I hope they will not do what many before them have done and confuse *confirmation* with *graduation*, thinking that once this is over they are done with church and can move on. We hope to see more of them, not less of them, after this Sunday. Again, I appeal to the congregation: Please, let each of them know how much you appreciate their presence and give each a warm welcome.

But mostly, this morning, I wanted to talk about Nicodemus. The young people have learned that that is one of the things that we do here. They learned that there are three important pieces of furniture in a Presbyterian Church. There is the table that is the place from which the sacrament of communion is celebrated; there is the font, where baptisms take place; and there is the pulpit (or the lectern and the pulpit together in our case) where a text from the Bible is read to the congregation and a sermon is given based upon that text. This morning we have the rare opportunity to use all three of these – the table, the font, and the pulpit. This morning the title of minister of word and sacrament gets full play.

And so we come to the text for this morning from the Gospel of John, chapter three, about a man named Nicodemus. What I want to say to the young people this morning is that even though this man lived nearly 2,000 years ago, and even though he was an adult; even though he was a very formal and strict observer of Jewish law; even though he was from a different culture and had never heard of ipods or cell phones and would have had no clue what a text message was; still he and they have something in common. What they have in common is curiosity.

These young people have lots of questions. They have written statements of faith and in those statements they have been encouraged to say not only what they believe but also what they wonder about, what they are not sure of, what they question, what they doubt. In other words, we have encouraged them to be honest and not to simply say things that they think we want to hear, but to say what they really think and believe. We have encouraged them to do their own thinking.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and Pharisees, in general, thought that they knew just about all there was to know about God. They were not known for asking questions but for giving answers. And yet here is this one Pharisee, Nicodemus, a learned man, who has been to seminary, who has a couple of academic degrees, who is supposed to know exactly what he believes, and one night he slips out of his home, telling his wife that he would be back in a little while, and he heads off to see a man with no formal education whom most of his fellow Pharisees think of as an imposter. He goes at night probably because he doesn't want to be seen. He goes to see Jesus because when Jesus talks about God he sounds not like someone who has taken some classes on the subject, but like someone who speaks from experience.

So he goes. And I would love to dissect the text and really go into it, but we don't have time for that this morning. So I just want to talk about his attitude. The attitude that Nicodemus has is that of someone who is curious. I have called it "the spirit of inquiry." When it comes to matters related to God, that is a good spirit, a good attitude to have, in my opinion. The Buddhists speak of it as "a beginner's mind."

We speak of teachers and students here at Westminster, because we have people in both of those roles. But the deeper truth is that we are all students, all learners. The word "disciple" means "student." There are no experts when it comes to matters of the Spirit. There are some people who have given the subject more thought than others, and so they may have a little more to say. But there are no experts. We are all beginners.

To the young people this morning, I want to say, this is not graduation. This is not an ending but a beginning. Or maybe it is better to say that it is a continuation of a journey that started many years ago for most of you, when your parents brought you to the front of this church or another church for your baptism. This is another step on the journey of faith.

So to Sara Jane, C.J., Erik, Katie, Megan, Andy and Patrick, remember Nicodemus. Don't ever get to the point where you stop asking questions. Don't ever stop wondering. Don't ever stop doing your own thinking. You will meet people, including maybe some of your friends at school, who will talk about God and the church in a way that makes it sound like they really know something for sure, something that cannot be questioned. Don't take their word for it. Question it. Keep a beginner's mind, like Nicodemus.

We are all very pleased that you are taking this step and joining all of us on the journey of faith and we look forward to seeing a lot more of you.