

Lent 2 A
John 3:1-17
March 5, 2023

“Credo”

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Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 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?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that God gave their only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 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."

It's not hard to imagine what this scene might have looked like. I see a darkly cloaked Pharisee closing his gate quietly, some hours after night

fall. He glances furtively to his right and then to his left before quickly scuttling into the dimly-lit city. He avoids the lamp-light, preferring the shadows, as he picks a careful path down lesser-traveled streets and back alleys on his way to the house where the Nazarene stayed. He doesn't want to be seen—doesn't want to answer any questions about what he's doing out at this time of night, who or where he might be going. He has questions of his own. He finally arrives at another gate, raps timidly on the door, and waits. A woman appears holding a candle. "You wish to see *him*," she says softly before she leads him through the courtyard to a comfortable dimly-lit room where Jesus rests. "Rabbi," the Pharisee begins as he assumes the role of a student seated at a master's feet, "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." Jesus answers him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above..." And on they talk, well into the night before the Pharisee leaves the place, still under the cover of darkness.

It's a compelling scene, isn't it? According to the story, Nicodemus was a highly respected member of his community, an expert on religious law, a rabbi himself and a member of the Sanhedrin, the council of rabbis. And he was a very wealthy man, a fact evidenced by the extravagant burial he would later give Jesus after the crucifixion. Clearly the man had questions and he needed to speak to Jesus. I wonder if their conversation offered him any real clarity.

Whether or not these verses clarified anything for Nicodemus, we can't know. What we can say with confidence, however, is that these verses clarified a lot of things for those Christians who would follow. In fact, for many people, a verse from this exchange functions as a sort of gospel in miniature. Of course, I'm referring to John 3:16 – the verse so proudly borne in body paint on bare-chested football fans, emblazoned on billboards, and plastered to the bumpers of countless cars. "For God so loved the world that God gave their only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." For the author of the fourth gospel, belief really matters.

Here at New England Church, most of us would likely agree with John—belief really does matter. We claim to be a non-creedal church and that means that while our beliefs do matter, no one gets to decide what we *have* to believe to be a member of this church. Over the past 22 months, I've gotten to know some of you fairly well. I know that there are folks in our congregation who believe in the trinitarian faith of the Apostles' Creed. And I know that there are folks here who don't – who, themselves are agnostic, atheist, or nontheist. I know that there are folks here who believe in the ethical teachings of Jesus and there are folks here who believe in the divinity of Jesus. There are folks here who believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God and there are folks here who believe that the Bible is the product of human experience, mythology, hope, and imagination. There are folks here who believe in a place called heaven and there are folks who hope to build heaven on earth.

We are a theologically diverse congregation. And I love it. In fact, I wouldn't be here if that weren't the case. But, saying that no one gets to decide what we have to believe to be a member of this church, is not the same as saying that all members of this church don't believe at least some of the same things. And it's definitely not the same as saying, that our beliefs don't matter or that you can believe whatever you want.

Sometimes, we become so caught up in what we don't believe, in the *via negativa*, that we fail to recognize that we still share other beliefs. Or, we become afraid to represent our own beliefs because we fear conflict with folks who don't share them. People in our kind of Christianity can get so focused on distancing ourselves from the rest, in saying what we're not, that we don't ever show others what and who we are.

And so today, at the risk of offending some and disappointing others, I'm going to attempt to state a few things that I believe, we all believe.

At New England Church, we believe in people.

We believe in the power of sacred story.

We believe in the importance of tradition and ritual.

We believe in the teachings and witness of Jesus.

We believe that all people have value.

We believe that we're meant to make a difference.

We believe that we can do more and be more together.

Many of us believe many other things, but all of us, I think, believe these core things. Just because ours is a church without a creed does not mean that ours is a faith without shared beliefs. And the faith that we do share is not an easy faith; it's a hard faith and it demands things of us. We understand that belief is more than just intellectual assent. Belief for us is active, dynamic, earth-changing. Believing, for us, is more than just *knowing*, it's the impetus for *doing*. At New England Church, we live into and out of our beliefs. That's why it matters that we have them.

I like that we're a non-creedal church. But I also like that there truly is a common core of shared beliefs among us. Let's not minimize or cheapen what we believe, or what our belief requires of us, by capitulating to an idea that at New England Church, you can believe whatever you want. As the old maxim goes: in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity. What's the essence of your belief, of your faith? Let's try and live life, every day, out of that. May it be so. Amen.