

May 31, Trinity Sunday: John 3:1-17

by [Ron Adams](#) in the [May 27, 2015](#) issue

There is a lot of talking going on in John 3:1-17. It's a theological gold mine. In this encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus speaks of being born again. He speaks of the necessity of being baptized in both water and the Holy Spirit. He hints at his identity as the one who descended from heaven, and the one who must be lifted up so that those who believe can be saved. Then Jesus closes with two of the most well-known verses in all of Christian scripture: "For God so loved the world . . ." One could preach a lifetime's worth of sermons without ever leaving John 3. And all of it is ours, thanks to this record of a nighttime encounter with Jesus.

It is a fateful meeting. I wonder if Nicodemus knows what he is getting into. He is a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. John's Gospel sets up the Pharisees as Jesus' opponents, even his enemies. Yet Nicodemus seeks him out. What draws him to Jesus? What motivates any of us to come to Jesus?

During my junior year of high school, gospel musicians Andraé Crouch and the Disciples came to town. They were scheduled to perform one evening at a nearby Mennonite campground. By that time my family was pretty well falling apart. My parents' marriage was collapsing under the weight of years of disappointment and regret. My siblings and I were caught up in our own efforts to survive that collapse, doing our best to maintain some semblance of normalcy. It was a hard time.

A side effect of my parents' drama was that I'd become disenchanted with Christianity. As far as I was concerned, it had proven itself useless in restoring our family. When my father proposed that we go as a family to hear Crouch, I wanted nothing to do with it. But I submitted, and we went.

We managed to get seats near the front of the pavilion. I sat there, arms folded, determined to grit my teeth and ride it out untouched. My parents could make me be there, but I didn't have to like it. I built a wall around my heart that nothing could penetrate.

Yet as the music played, I met Jesus. I didn't want to. I didn't believe I needed to. I came with no other agenda than making it through the night. I came with no

curiosity, and certainly no love. I had no expectations. It never occurred to me that someone might be there waiting for me.

I met Jesus, and he touched me. He unfolded my crossed arms and held me to himself. Jesus walked right through the barrier around my heart. I can still feel it, that moment when I realized what was happening. I started to cry. I couldn't help myself, so Jesus came and helped me.

When the concert was over, my dad went and spoke to Crouch, who then came back to where I was sitting. He asked me if I wanted to give myself to Jesus, to ask Jesus to come into my heart. Before I could think, I said yes. He prayed for me. And so I was born again, and this time from above.

In the years since then, my faith has changed. It has waxed and waned. But the love that came over me that evening remains. That love changed everything. It not only saves the whole world, it also saved me. Drawn to Jesus against my will, I met him and was changed by his love.

I wish John told us what draws Nicodemus to Jesus that night. Does he come with a list of questions, hoping for answers to take back to his fellow Pharisees? Does he come out of curiosity? Does he drag his feet, bemoaning the fate that leads him there? I wish John told us what goes on inside Nicodemus's heart, how his heart is changed as a result of that meeting. What draws Nicodemus to Jesus? John doesn't say.

What John does tell us is that it is Nicodemus who later assists Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the broken body of Jesus for burial. He brings a bag of spices with which to anoint the body. Then he and Joseph wrap the body in linen and lay Jesus to rest. These are the kinds of intimate, generous, and careful things we do only for those we love.

Could it be that what draws Nicodemus to Jesus is love?

This may seem like an idle question. But even though we cannot answer it definitively, I think it is worth asking. It can call us to go beyond the words spoken and the theology proclaimed, to enter into the space where two hearts meet. Whatever draws Nicodemus to Jesus, he leaves that meeting changed. Words can certainly change us; they can shape us intellectually and form our behavior. But it takes more than words to cause us to love.

It seems to me that we've become so familiar with all of the words Jesus speaks in John 3, all of the theological treasures he displays, that we can forget to ask what it is that draws a Pharisee to come and see Jesus. By focusing only on the words, we can forget what it feels like to meet Jesus.

Those words are rich, worthy of all the attention we've given them. Still, there's a part of me that wishes we'd spend some time wondering about the miracle that touches Nicodemus's heart and draws him to step into the night in search of Jesus. I wish we'd spend time considering how that experience changes him. Who knows? We may discover something about our own hearts in the process.