

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“GRACE THAT FREES US”

Scripture Lesson: John 3:1-17; 7:45-52; 19: 38-42

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 1, 2026
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

John 3: 1-17; 7: 45-52; 19: 38-42

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 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 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.” 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 must be born from above.’ 8 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.” 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 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. 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.

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.

The Unbelief of Those in Authority

45 Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, “Why did you not arrest him?” 46 The police answered, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” 47 Then the Pharisees replied, “Surely you have not been deceived, too, have you? 48 Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? 49 But this crowd, which does not know the law, they are accursed.” 50 Nicodemus, 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?” 52 They replied, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.”

The Burial of Jesus

38 After 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. 39 Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. 40 They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. 41 Now 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. 42 And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Grace That Frees Us

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

In the Gospel According to John, Nicodemus shows up three times, and on those three separate occasions, we trace a journey that leaves us with both questions and hope.

His appearances are brief — we read them a moment ago in their entirety — but, for John, Nicodemus is by no means a passing character, and neither should he be for us.

The prologue of John's Gospel opens with the language of creation: light shining in the darkness, and the darkness not overcoming it. And that darkness is not simply metaphorical — it is something we see and feel in our own time. Just yesterday, we woke up to the news that operation "Epic Fury" was in full effect in Iran, and we hope and pray for the people of Iran and for their future. Yet even now, they are acutely aware that it sometimes feels the darkest just before dawn.

John does not deny the darkness, but he does decry it, as well as the actions of those who are cloaked by it. Here in chapter three of John's Gospel, a man steps into that darkness and finds himself in the presence of the light of the world, and, as it happens, his story and the story of the Gospel itself will inevitably move from darkness to light.

John introduces Nicodemus as "a Pharisee...a leader of the Jews." Notice, he's not a villain. He is well-read and morally earnest. In many ways, he is the kind of person we would expect to recognize the work of God.

But he comes to Jesus by night. Now, maybe he wanted an uninterrupted conversation, or maybe he wanted to keep his conversation under wraps — we don't know. But what we do know is that, in John's Gospel, darkness is not an accident; it functions like a literary device, speaking not only to a time of day, but to a spiritual condition.

Nicodemus begins respectfully: "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."

Friends, that is no small profession, especially for a Jewish leader. The signs of Jesus did bear witness to the fact that God was at work in Jesus' life, and Nicodemus had seen enough to know that something more than human power was present. But Jesus does not linger over the compliment. He goes straight to the heart of the matter: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

The Greek word that Jesus used for the phrase "born from above" is the word *anōthen*, and it can mean "born again" or "born from above." However we translate it, the meaning is clear: entry into God's kingdom

requires more than good deeds or an intellectual agreement — it requires more than being a Pharisee, or a Sunday School teacher, or a Stephen Minister, or even a preacher — it requires a new birth.

And this is where the idea of grace — which we are considering throughout the season of Lent — unsettles us. I mean, if new birth is required, how can it be achieved? We cannot birth ourselves; indeed, it must happen to us.

Nicodemus stumbles over the image. “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” Apparently, when Jesus was talking about theology, Nicodemus’s mind went to biology, and when Jesus spoke of the Spirit, Nicodemus’s mind turned to the womb.

When Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit,” he is reaching back to the Scriptures. We read this morning about how the prophet Ezekiel spoke of a day when God would sprinkle clean water upon his people and give them a new heart and a new spirit, which is to say, among other things, that someone’s heritage is not a substitute for renewal, for regeneration.

Jesus pressed Nicodemus further: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

By the time we get to John chapter 7, Jesus is very much a known quantity. Officers had been sent to arrest him, but they had returned empty-handed, saying, “Never has anyone spoken like this!”

The Pharisees scoff at the idea — and who should appear among them but Nicodemus? He speaks as if in defense of Jesus: “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?”

Granted, it was a modest defense. Nicodemus didn’t declare Jesus to be the Messiah; he didn’t publicly align himself with Jesus’ disciples — he simply appealed to fairness, and it cost him. “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?”

Nicodemus’s final scene is set in a garden. Jesus has been crucified and the disciples are scattered, and all hope seemed to be buried with him. Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for the body. And John tells us: “Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.”

We notice that John makes it a point to remind us of the night, and in doing so, it places a cloud over even this occasion. “But why is that?” we may ask. After all, a hundred pounds of spices is an extravagant gift, a gift fit for a king. What’s more, Nicodemus took part in the wrapping of Jesus’ body. That says something, right?

Still, we are left to wonder about Nicodemus. Were his actions indicative of his belief? Or was his merely a reverence for a fallen teacher? John’s Gospel does not spell it out.

I tend to look at the story of Nicodemus as a progression — maybe even a redemptive progression. Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind that everything Nicodemus did happened more or less in secret.

In John chapter 3, Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark, and in chapter 7 his advocacy had more to do with Pharisaical law than any kind of personal advocacy. Then in chapter 19, Nicodemus may not have come to Jesus in the dark, but he still wasn’t out in the open. In that garden there’s no danger, no threat.

Of course, from the vantage point of Easter, we see more than Nicodemus ever saw, and what we see is that Nicodemus took part in preparing the body of the One through whom God so loved the world.

I wonder if this is where the Church finds herself during the season of Lent: standing, in a sense, with Nicodemus in the garden, men and women who cannot undo what has been done. We cannot raise what has been buried.

And yet it is also the case that it is precisely at those places where we are completely helpless that grace meets us, and grace is intended to free us from guilt, and fear, and the need to hide in the night. We are free to ask again what it means to be born from above.

There is a sense in which Nicodemus buries Jesus twice: first in misunderstanding and then in a tomb. Yet neither burial can hold Christ, which is the Gospel's insistence. This kingdom that cannot be seen without being born from above is inaugurated through death and resurrection.

The Son of Man will be lifted up so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

The question that lingers is not finally about Nicodemus. It is about us, because our respect for Jesus isn't enough; our good moral character isn't enough; our cautious defense, as helpful as it may be, is not a confession. At the end of the day, it is not enough.

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Such is the grace that cleanses us and frees us — it enables us to step out of the shadows, out of the darkness, and into the light.

This morning, that promise is not only spoken — it is given. At the Lord's Table, we do not manufacture new birth — we receive it, and we celebrate it.

In the bread and the cup, we declare what Nicodemus could not yet see: that the Son of Man was lifted up for us, and that through his broken body and shed blood, eternal life is not an idea, but a very gift of grace.

The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead — praise be to God — has given us life from above.

Nicodemus's story ends in a garden with a sealed tomb. But that's not where John's Gospel ends. The next chapter in that garden will bring another visitor, this time at dawn, and the stone will be rolled away.

Perhaps Nicodemus learned then what Jesus meant the first time they met. Perhaps that teacher of Israel finally saw the kingdom and came out of the shadows. We don't know.

There is an emptiness that accompanies Nicodemus's story — and any story, really — that does not include God's love, which has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord.

Still, the wind keeps blowing, and the invitation still stands: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.