

John 3:1-17

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 he gave his 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.

"Believing In Jesus"

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John 3:17



In her reflection, 'Stay for Tea, Nicodemus, Tea, Nicodemus', Barbara Brown Taylor wrote: "Once upon a time there was a woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. First she read everything she could get her hands on---history, philosophy, psychology, religion. While she became a very smart person, nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for. She found other smart people, and asked them about the meaning of life, but while their discussions were long and lovely, no two of them agreed on the same thing and still she had no answer. Finally she put all her belongings in storage and set off in search of the meaning of life. She went to South America. She went to India. Everywhere she went, people told her they did not know the meaning of life, but they had heard of a man who did, only they were not sure where he lived. She asked about him in every country on earth until finally, deep in the Himalayas, someone told her how to reach his house—a tiny little hut perched on the side of a mountain just below the tree line. She climbed and climbed to reach his front door. When she finally got there, with knuckles so cold they hardly worked, she knocked. "Yes?" said the kind-looking old man who opened it. She thought she would die of

happiness. "I have come halfway around the world to ask you one question," she said. "Please come in and have some tea," the old man said. "No," she said. "I mean, no thank you. I didn't come all this way for tea. I came for an answer. Won't you tell me, please, what is the meaning of life?" "We shall have tea," the old man said, so she gave up and came inside. While he was brewing the tea she caught her breath and began telling him about all the books she had read, all the people she had met, all the places she had been. The old man listened (which was just as well, since his visitor did not leave any room for him to reply), and as she talked he placed a fragile tea cup in her hand. Then he began to pour the tea. She was so busy talking that she did not notice when the tea cup was full, so the old man just kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides of the cup and spilled to the floor in a steaming waterfall. "what are you doing?!" she yelled when the tea burned her hand. "It's full, can't you see that? Stop! There's no more room!" "Just so," the old man said to her. "You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There is no more room in your cup. Come back when it is empty and then we will talk."

Meanwhile, several thousand miles to the west, a ruler of the Jews named Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. These two dispensed with a tea ritual, but the outcome was the same. Nicodemus came looking for answers. Jesus would not cooperate. He poured tea all over his visitor's hand and said, in effect, that Nicodemus already had gallons of answers available to him. What he needed was one drop of experience—one moment of new birth---and he could leave all his answers lying in puddles on the floor. When Nicodemus protested that he did not know what Jesus was talking about, Jesus said, "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" Part of the problem, I think, was the difference between what Jesus meant when he said "believe" and what Nicodemus meant by the same word. On one level, to believe someone means simply to accept what that person says as true, usually on the basis of some evidence. Someone shows

you a picture of himself clinging the rock face of a mountain, tells you it can be done, and you say, "I believe you." You accept the proposition. You give your intellectual assent, but it does not interfere with the way you live your life, because it is all in your head. There is another level of belief that is much more visceral. Instead of showing you the pictures, someone invites you to go rock climbing with him. As he checks the knots on your harness and runs your safety line through the carabineer around his waist, he assures you that everything will be all right. The proper response at that point is not "I believe you" but "I believe in you," because you are way past anything like intellectual assent. You have set yourself in relationship with this person and you are trusting him with your life.

Nicodemus was half-way there. He came by night to interview the new teacher in town. He knew he was good—he had checked his references—but he wanted more information. He wanted to see the accident reports, check out the insurance coverage. He wanted to handle the equipment, maybe try it on for size. He wanted the teacher to say something that would take away his doubts and make it easy for him to say yes, but the teacher would not cooperate. Believe in me. That was Jesus' dare to Nicodemus. Turn your cup upside down. Turn your mind inside out. Step into the air. Ride the wind. Be born anew, and live. "How can this be?" Those are Nicodemus' last words in this passage, which makes him a sort of patron saint for all of us who get stuck at the foot of the mountain, looking up, without the faintest idea of how to begin. Here is how, Jesus says. Watch me. Put your hand here. Now bring up your foot. Don't think about it too hard. Just to as I do. Believe me. Believe in me, and when we get to the top, we will have some tea" (Christian Century, p. 195, 2/ 21/1996).

Prayer. Fill my cup, Lord, I lift it up, Lord! Come and quench this thirsting of my soul; bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more—fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole. Amen.