

**Michael Gehring**

**“Elevated”**

**John 3: 11-16**

**Main Street UMC, Kernersville, NC**

**July 22, 2018**

I hope you understand by the end of this sermon why I’m a fan of Nicodemus. In fact, I’m here this day to establish the Nicodemus fan club. But before I get to that, let me tell you two stories.

The first one is a story that Tom Long tells. Many years ago, in another day and time, a woman drove down from her estate in New York state in her brand-new roadster. She pulled up to the swanky Nassau Inn in Princeton dressed to the max with a fur, jewelry, the whole works. As she got out of the car, she noticed a man standing there with unruly hair and a wrinkled up suit. Thinking he’s the porter, she pressed some money into the palm of his hand, and commanded, ***“Bring my bags into the hotel.”*** She then disappeared behind the hotel doors. Not knowing what else to do, he (Albert Einstein) put the money into his pocket, picked up the bags and walked into the hotel.

She could have had a conversation with one of the leading scientific minds of the ages, but instead, she simply had a well-educated porter. You see what she did, don’t you? She looked past him. She didn’t really see him.

Let me tell you another story from the opposite end of the economic spectrum and it’s a story on me. Afterwards, as we shake hands, you can come up to me and say, ***“Now preacher, I hope you’re not doing that anymore.”***

I used to work at Princeton Video Express on Nassau Street. I was a poor seminarian who needed money. This is the 1980’s. The advanced technology of the day was the VHS tape. Imagine that. You didn’t have to go to the movie theatre. Now you could watch movies in your home. This was a big deal. Revolutionary! We had some well-off clients, professors and administrators at the University, people like Peter Benchley who wrote *Jaws* and the actress Brooke Shields.

There was this one guy who was different from the crowd. I thought so highly of him because he was like me, or so I thought. He wore work shoes, and industrial kind of clothes like he just stepped out of a factory. I liked him so much because he was like my people, blue-collar; neither one of my parents graduated from high school. Mom dropped out in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and dad in the 10<sup>th</sup>. Dad used to always say that he graduated from the School of Hard Knocks.

I’d liked this guy. He was just as kind and ordinary as they come. I never paid much attention to his last name. It too was common, kind of like Smith or Jones. One day, I’m watching the evening news and he’s not wearing his industrial clothes. He’s wearing a suit and he’s surrounded by people dressed to the 9’s. He

and his siblings were contesting his father's will. I saw my guy, my blue-collar soul brother, J. Seward Johnson, standing there, and they said he was the grandson of one of the founders of Johnson & Johnson. My mind was stuck in down gear like cognitive dissonance.

You see what I did, don't you? I didn't see him for who he really was. I saw him for who I wanted him to be. Later I learned that he was a famous sculptor with statues all over the world. I cast him in a prefabricated form. How easy it is to look past people, especially if they appear to fall beneath or above our social-class.

Looking past people is not all that unusual. I think it's all too common and that's why I'm elevating Nicodemus today. Down through the years some preachers have been harsh on Nicodemus. Some preachers have preached about how cowardly Nicodemus was coming to Jesus at night.

It took a lot of courage and humility to come and see Jesus at all. Nicodemus was a high-ranking Pharisee which means he was of the privileged class and affluent. Nicodemus was a Jerusalem aristocrat who was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court. Nicodemus was wealthy. He knew how to manage the powers of the day.

Yet he came out in public and met with Jesus, the teacher that many of his fellow aristocrats were scandalized by and were plotting against. That takes courage to risk the ire, disdain, anger of your own colleagues. Also notice Nicodemus' humility. He didn't dismiss Jesus. He didn't look past Jesus. He didn't say, *"I don't need to listen to you. You're just a carpenter's son from the backwaters of the backwaters, Nazareth."* He didn't say *"Oh I don't need to pay attention to him; he's just a self-appointed prophet. He wasn't trained in Jerusalem by Gamaliel, nor did he receive a prized education. He wasn't a member of the clergy guild."*

It's really incredible that Nicodemus sought Jesus out. Not only sought him out but respected him addressing Jesus as, *"Rabbi, teacher."* It's amazing that Nicodemus didn't look past Jesus. You know it wasn't all that difficult to look past Jesus back then, just as it is not that difficult to look past him now. It's so easy to cast him into a prefabricated form of who we want him to be rather than who he truly was.

It's so easy to look past Jesus. So often we don't want a relationship with Jesus; we just want a functional Jesus to remedy the mess of our times and lives. We want a genie in bottle. We tend not to spend time with him, but we read our theology and fail to meditate on God's Word. So often we Christians can get so comfortable talking about Jesus that we forget to talk to Jesus.

Many years ago I was at Union Theological Seminary for a continuing education course on spiritual autobiographies. One of the leaders of this workshop was Dan Wakefield. Dan is a novelist from Indiana and was friends with Kurt

Vonnegut. Dan wrote a book called ***Returning*** that recounts his spiritual journey of abandoning the faith and decades later, reclaiming faith in God. He told a story at that workshop about being at a conference with Henri Nouwen, one of the great spiritual writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nouwen was a Roman Catholic priest who taught at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. Nouwen was careful not to get caught in the theology trap of just talking about God as if God were some-kind of a patient on the operating table. Nouwen stressed having a living relationship with Jesus.

All of the conference speakers were invited to a banquet in the home of an older lady who was extremely wealthy and one of the major patrons of the conference. During the dinner, the host turned to Nouwen and said, ***“Father, I am a lapsed Catholic, and a lapsed Christian. I just can’t be active in a church when the church is constantly out of synch with the times. It excludes women from the priesthood, and excludes non-Catholics from communion.”***

Nouwen was silent. She insisted and said, ***“Father, what do you think about that?”*** Nouwen replied, ***“Madam I think that’s all a crock of shit. Just take 5 minutes from your busy day and pray, ‘Lord Jesus come into my heart.’ Pray this prayer everyday and you will be changed. It’s not about the church’s failings. It’s about a relationship with Jesus. It’s all about a relationship with Jesus.”***

It’s not about the talk. It’s about the walk. It’s all about a relationship with Jesus.