

### **Sermon Notes - March 5, 2023**

#### *“Curious or Committed to Jesus” -- Knowing About Him or Knowing Him Relationally*

(John 3:1-9, 16-17)

Many years ago, there was a man who came from Syria to the United States. He belonged to the Islam faith. He had studied Islam all his life and he thought he was a very religious person. But, he said, “There is something missing in my life. I heard this Minister preaching the Gospel on the radio. It intrigued me so much that I listened the next day, and the next, and the next. Finally, after a week or two, I went to a nearby Christian church and I sat down with the Pastor. I said, ‘Tell me about this Jesus and the Gospels that you know about - that you preach about.’” So, the Pastor sat down with him for two or three hours. He read the scriptures; they prayed, and they talked. The Pastor tried to answer as many questions as the Syrian man had for him as best he could. Then, the Pastor asked the man if he wanted to pray and ask Jesus to come into his life to live and to forgive him of his sins? The Syrian man said, “Yes. I want to know this Jesus because something is missing in my life. I’ve been religious all my life, but I’m missing something - the peace and joy in my life.” He asked Jesus to come into his life. The Pastor said that when the man opened his eyes, there was a radiance about his face and an inner peace. He said, “Thank you, Pastor. I found that missing piece; it was Jesus.”

Some of you know of the legendary baseball player, Mickey Mantle. He’s deceased now, but he had a wonderful baseball career. He played eighteen seasons for the New York Yankees; he was a three-time American League “Most Valuable Baseball Player”; he was in seven World Series titles; he hit 536 career home runs -- he was quite a baseball player. *(In fact, my dad loved him so much that he wanted one of my brothers to play with the Yankees. But, guess what? ... None of them made it. But, he loved Mickey Mantle.)* Mickey Mantle had a wonderful baseball career and a good life. He was married and had children. But, after he retired from baseball, his life took a bad turn. He turned to drinking, and he alienated most of his family, friends, and the people that cared the most about him.

There was one baseball teammate that never gave up on him, and that was Bobby Richardson. Bobby Richardson was a strong Christian who prayed for Mickey Mantle. He often visited him – even when Mickey Mantle had his liver transplant, Bobby visited him every day in the hospital to pray for him. Towards the end of Mickey Mantle’s life he was in the hospital dying, and Bobby Richardson continued to visit him – he and his wife both. One day (to Mickey), he said, “Mickey, I know you aren’t at peace. Can I tell you about Jesus and how much he means to me and what he can do for your life?” He read him the scripture of John 3:16: “For God so loved the world – For God so loved Mickey that he gave his only begotten Son. And if Mickey would believe, he would not perish but have everlasting life.” After that, Mickey prayed and asked Jesus to forgive him of his sins, and to live in his heart. He confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior. A few days later, Richardson’s wife went to see Mickey and she said, “Mickey, I just want to make sure that you’re okay to die. I want to make sure your relationship is right with God.” He looked at her and said, “I know everything that I need to know. For God so loved me that he gave his only son that if I believed in Him, I wouldn’t perish, but have eternal life. I’m okay with God.”

Today, I want you to think about two things: **First, are you curious about the faith of Jesus Christ or are you committed to him?** Second question: **Do you know about God or do you know him personally?** Think about these questions as we go through this story.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee; he was wealthy, highly educated, and an esteemed Rabbi and teacher. Now, he was a Pharisee which meant that he was a teacher of the law. He interpreted the Commandments and the Torah; he knew it by memory. Can you imagine knowing the first five books of the Bible by memory? He knew it and he could interpret it. He was married, had family, was highly visible in the community. He also belonged to the Sanhedrin. (*The Sanhedrin is the Jewish High Supreme Court.*) When Rome took over the province of Judea, they allowed the Jews to have something called the Sanhedrin as the Jewish Supreme Court to deal with all the Jewish affairs. It was made up of Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were those who were teachers of the law. The Sadducees were the priests and the temple administrators and associates.

Nicodemus was highly visible, powerful, and wealthy. But, Nicodemus decides one night to go see Jesus. Now, keep in mind that Jesus has been teaching and preaching already and then (in John's Gospel), Jesus has already been to Passover. He's gone through the temple and overturned the money changers' tables. Nicodemus was pretty curious about Jesus -- "Who is this guy? What kind of Gospel is he preaching and teaching?" He's curious about Jesus, but, maybe Nicodemus knows there is something missing from his life. He's been religious all his life - he knows the Jewish laws and commandments. He's been in the temple every day. He knows about God, but does he know God personally, relationally? Is he curious but not committed? So, he goes to see Jesus. He says, "Jesus, we (Pharisees) know that you must be a teacher of God because you couldn't do all these miracles if you weren't from God."

Jesus said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again." Now, Jesus knew that they should understand that because the Old Testament prophecy said that when Christ comes back, he will renew the world, and the transformation of people would be called "Rebirth" or "New birth." He thought because Nicodemus read the Old Testament, he should know that. Nicodemus still didn't quite get it and asked the Lord: "What do you mean I have to be born again? I can't possibly go back into my mother's womb as a large adult man." Jesus said, "Flesh gives life to flesh, but the Spirit is the Spirit of God." He's talking not about born again, but "born from above" - from God - a spiritual birth of man. He didn't quite get it, so Jesus said, "Listen. You know the effects of wind, right? You don't know where it's coming from or where it's going, but you can hear the sound of it and experience the effects of it." He's trying to say to Nicodemus that the Spirit is the same way. The Spirit comes and goes and you're not exactly sure where it comes from or where it's going, but you can experience God's Spirit at work in your life because it transforms our attitudes and our actions -- that's God's Spirit at work in you. We don't know if Nicodemus ever converted to the faith, but most New Testament scholars think that he did. The reason is that if he didn't do it then, he went back home and thought about it. Isn't that the way most of us are? We hear something, we have to think about it and pray about it, let it gel for a while and then, all of a sudden, when we least expect it, we

come to faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible says, “When we search with all our thoughts and minds, we will know him.” He’s there for us.

Years ago, I had a teenager in my youth group at First Concord named Chris. Chris was about 17 or 18 years old. He was a senior in High School. He said, “Miss Peggy, my parents are putting pressure on me to join the church – to know Jesus, to be baptized, and to become a member of the church. I know about God. I come to church every Sunday, but I’m not ready to commit my life to Jesus yet.” I said, “Chris, when you’re ready, you’ll know in your mind and your heart when that time is right.” I want you to know that was in the fall of his senior year. The next summer, he went to youth summer camp that we had, and one Saturday night while we were there, there was a worship service. They gave an invitation for people who wanted to know Jesus Christ as Savior to come down and they’d pray with them. Chris came to see me when the worship service was over and said, “Miss Peggy, remember what you told me about I would know in my mind and heart when that time was right for me to do it? Tonight was the time. And, I want you to know that I’ve come to believe in Jesus and commit my life to following Him. I know I have a lot to learn about living the Christian life, but I invited Jesus to come and live in my life.”

God’s Spirit works in us in different ways. With Nicodemus, we don’t know if he became a Christian then, but most scholars say he did later. If you read in John 7, there was a time when the Pharisees were upset with Jesus and his teachings and his healings. You see, the Sanhedrin was the driving force in the plot to kill Jesus – that was made up of Pharisees and Sadducees. Nicodemus was part of that group. But, when it came time to stand up for Jesus, even without acknowledging his faith, he stood up for Jesus in John, chapter 7. And then if you follow in John 19, when Jesus had been crucified on the cross, there was a secret believer by the name of Joseph of Arimathea who was a wealthy man and he came to the cross where Jesus hung. He asked the soldiers and the king for permission to take down the body of Jesus and prepare him for burial. Joseph and Nicodemus took Jesus’ body and anointed it. I have a hard time thinking that Nicodemus would’ve done that if he hadn’t been a believer in Jesus. So, at some point, we believe that he became a believer in Jesus Christ.

Today, I want to ask you: Are you curious about Jesus? Are you really committed to him? You know about him, but do you know him? You know, we can go to church all our lives, read the Bible, give our money, and still not know God in our hearts. Many years ago in Concord, there was a 73-year old woman and her husband that were coming to our church. Their son (a doctor), his wife, and three kids attended our church. The father was sick with cancer and was dying. The 73-year old mother was attending our church. One day, when we went to visit the dad, she asked if she could follow us outside. "I have something on my heart and mind that I'd just like to talk about." We came back to visit her and she said, "I've been to church almost my entire life - Sunday School, Worship, Wednesday night Bible Study, but I don't know Jesus personally. She wanted us to help her know more about Jesus and to pray with her. We did -- we talked about the gospels and Jesus and how much he loved her. I want you to know that she prayed and asked Jesus to come into her heart and her life. And, then she asked, "Would you baptize me?" About two weeks later, she was baptized at the church and became a member of the church. Now, you know Baptists do it a little bit different from the UCC, and please understand that. In the Baptist Church, they make a profession of faith and then they are baptized. She was baptized at 73-years old! What I want you to hear is her say, ***"I've known about God all my life, but I didn't know Jesus in my heart and my life. I didn't know he could make such a difference in my life. I have a peace and a joy now that I've never had in my life, and I want you to know that."***

***Are you curious about Jesus or committed to Him? Do you know about him or do you know him - have a relationship with Him?*** Then, I want to end with this... Jesus said, "For God so loved the world," and replace your name there. "For God so loved {you} that (if you believe in him) you would not perish, but have everlasting life." Martin Luther called John 3:16, "The Gospel in miniature."

I heard about a lady in Colorado named Brittini Darras, who was a high school teacher. One of her students almost committed suicide. She attempted it, but survived. Her teacher was so touched that she cried about it. She called the girl's mother and said, "I had no idea how alone

she was and thinking nobody cares about her. Do you mind if I write your daughter a letter?" The Mom agreed; so, she wrote the girl a letter and told her how much she saw in her - a keen intellect, a great personality, and a young woman with a bright future. She went on and on telling her about the good things that she saw in her. She also saw the difference that it made in that one girl. The girl told her mother, "I didn't know that anybody cared and I definitely didn't know that my teacher knew great things about me." From that letter, the teacher went on to write a letter to all 130 of her students that year - can you imagine? They told others what a difference that one letter had made in their lives.

I want you to know that Jesus wrote a love letter to you... God wrote a love letter to you. "For God so loved the world..." Are you curious or committed? Do you know about him or do you know him? That's what Jesus was asking Nicodemus and us today.