

Trinity Sunday
31-May-2015
"Mind the Gap"
Brian Lennstrom

Texts:

Isaiah 31:31-34
Romans 8:12-17
John 3:1-17

Nicodemus comes at night to see Jesus: he's a little timid about Jesus; a lot of us are a little timid about Jesus. That's okay. Jesus can handle that. "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.'" So far, so good. Nicodemus is spot on. If Jesus were in the habit of high-fiving people—which I don't think he was—He and Nicodemus would be high-fiving right now. Then Jesus replies with what I imagine is a rather off-handed comment: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

In any case, Nicodemus does not understand. Nicodemus says 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?" What to us is likely a very reasonable question is, to Jesus, a step in the completely wrong direction. Any high-fiving is over. Jesus lectures Nicodemus for another 17 verses and all that Nicodemus can squeak out is a quiet little, "How can these things be?" in verse 9. He still doesn't get it.

So what has happened? What did he say that was so bad? The problem is that when Nicodemus—just like us—when Nicodemus doesn't understand something, he rethinks the topic in terms of how it applies to him. He reorients the subject, with himself in the middle. If there's the possibility of being born again, he wants to know how he can do it. And he doesn't know how he *can* do it.

When I was in sixth grade, in Longview, Washington, we didn't have organized football teams for kids to play on. But one time, our elementary school challenged the sixth grade boys from another elementary school to a game. The coach was Mr. Jennings, who happened to be my teacher. I was thrilled. It was the first school football game I had ever played in. Was I not ready? Had I not prepared for this moment all my life by faithfully watching football on television, watching America's team, which in the 1960s was, of course, the Green Bay Packers? Which had its own holy trinity of Vince Lombardi, Bart Star and Ray Nitschke, the great linebacker? And it was linebacker that I was so eager to play! Although Mr. Jennings did not start me—I don't know why, I probably weighed at least 65 pounds—I soon begged him to put me in as linebacker.

And he did! First play, they gave it to the running back: he ran right at me, ran right over me and made a big gain. I don't know why they even bothered with a huddle after that—there was nothing to discuss and no decision to be made. Second play, they gave it to the running back: he ran right at me, ran right over me and made a big gain. It was at this point that Mr. Jennings called out—rather uncharitably in my opinion and in a voice just loud enough to be heard by everyone in a two block radius: "Hey Brian, you begged me to put you in as linebacker, and that's twice now that they've run over you."

Don't you love people like that? Not only do you fail, but here's someone who broadcasts it for everyone. Doesn't add any value, just sort of *memorializes* your failure.

What was my mistake? My mistake, like Nicodemus, was I didn't mind the gap. Like Nicodemus, I reoriented the situation around the question, where do *I* fit in? There's no "I" in "team," but if you juggle the letters a bit, there is "me." Even in the way I just told that story, it's entirely about me. I don't even remember if we won or not. The important thing to me wasn't how *we* might win, it was how *I* could succeed as a linebacker. It wasn't so much a matter of self-preoccupation; it was a matter of my not understanding the context.

Now, the question, "How does this apply to me?" is a great question. Every book we read, every sermon we listen to, every news story we hear, we should ask, how does this apply to me? Or, how can I apply this? How does this change me? And I'll bet that Jesus would have been happy for Nicodemus to ask how he fit in, but *not as the first question*. Before that question is asked, we need to ask *a different* question. We need to ask about the gap. Because Nicodemus doesn't understand the gap, he's jumping the gun to ask how being born again applies to him. As the second question, it's a great question. As a first question, it's inappropriate.

When it comes to the things of the Spirit, what is the gap? To answer that question in the book of John, we have to understand John's eschatology. Those of you unlucky enough to have heard my previous sermon—March 22nd, available on our web site—may remember that "eschatos" in Greek means "last." In the first century, the Jews had a very complex set of expectations around what would happen when Messiah came: they called it the Day of the Lord; the End of Days. The ministry of Jesus realized some of these expectations completely; other fulfillments had a beginning but won't be complete until Jesus does return again. This was a eschatology of time, and was very prevalent in and around the first century, in part because the Romans were such awful people, in terms of being occupiers.

Eschatology was a prevalent theme in the teaching and preaching of Jesus in the 30s of the first century but by the end of the first century, likely only one disciple is still alive—John—and Jesus has still not returned. And as John thinks about recording his own version of the gospel story, he realizes that the impact of Jesus on time has a corresponding impact on space. In other words, that in addition to an eschatology of *time*, there's an eschatology of *space*. Not physical space, but spiritual space. The space of heaven and of earth. In other words, that just as there's a gap in time when Messiah appears, so there's a gap in space that Jesus the Son must fill. (In connecting time and space in this way, I might add, John anticipates the work of Albert Einstein by 1800 years!) In short—and to put it in Trinitarian language for this Trinity Sunday—the Father sends the Son to bridge the gap between the presence of the Father and the earth.

So how do we understand that gap? Let's go to Isaiah, who explains it for us. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple, etc., etc. And the seraphim called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory,' etc., etc. And Isaiah said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" That's the gap—the gap between people, who have unclean lips, and the holy God.

When you open the newspaper and read about another bomb in a marketplace, that's the gap. When you hear about the police beating an unarmed man or a mob attacking the police, that's the gap. When you look at how violent we Americans are, the violence outside and the violence in our own hearts, that's the gap. When you're separated from someone you love because of death or bitterness, that's the gap. The

loneliness we feel is the gap. The loneliness and the fear.

This is the truth that Nicodemus does not understand, because if he understood it, his first question wouldn't have been about being born again. He wouldn't have reoriented the situation around the fact that He doesn't understand how he fits in. He would have spent a moment contemplating the truth that the gap is bridged, and that's not a work that he can contribute to. That's a work for only three persons, namely, the persons of the Trinity, and Nicodemus is not invited. Here we are at Trinity Sunday and the most important truth for us is to understand—even if we understand it only a little—is how the Trinity have bridged the gap between the God and the world.

It would have been better, once Jesus had said, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," for Nicodemus to say again, this time with more feeling, "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." And left it at that. That statement reflects the context of the Person doing the work—the Son; where He comes from—the presence of the Father; and the work being done—His teaching and His signs. Because our experience is never the center of the situation.

We have a congregational conversation scheduled today just after the service, and I hope to see you all there. Because this is our Nicodemus moment. This is our opportunity to say not, "Coach, put me in!" but to say, "I get what you did, Holy Trinity." I, too, want to come to you—even if I have to sneak in while others aren't watching, like Nicodemus—to learn a little about myself and to help others learn a little about themselves. We can say that I will resist the temptation to think even about the discernment of my gifts in terms of what they mean to *me*. In other words, we can say, God, I'm interested in what you have to say about my *commissioning*.

Because on Team Jesus, enthusiasm, skills and experience are important, but Coach Jesus is the One who tells you when you'll play and where you'll fit. Put another way, the people of the Bible are not who they are because it's who they *want* to be. They are who they are because it's that they *have* to be. And human experience is not nearly as important as we make it out to be. The most important experience is the experience of Coach Jesus. And the process of hearing and understanding what Coach Jesus is saying is, here at Christ Episcopal, called the Discernment process.

Hearing the coach is not an easy task. After all, everyone wants to "armchair quarterback." We should not be surprised when we have second thoughts. That, too, is the gap. We may say, God, I don't think I have much of a gift. I'm not sold on the process of discernment. I'm afraid I might be asked to spend time that I don't want to spend, doing things I don't want to do. I'm skeptical. And I'm probably a little afraid. So be it! Jesus is kind. And at this moment, at this Nicodemus moment, as Francois Fenelon said, if you can't give the thing in your closed hand to Jesus—if you're just too hesitant—then at least open your hand and let Him take it from you.