


THE
PLYMOUTH  H
PULPIT

watch the sermons | plymouthchurch.org

“The Life of Following Jesus”

John 3:1-21

Brett Younger
Senior Minister

August 27, 2023

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you're 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 replied, "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 God gave God's 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. Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

John 3:1-21

Bruce Springsteen confesses, “I made it all up.”

The Boss admits that Bruce Springsteen, the persona, the gritty working-class everyperson, is a creation.

He says, “I’ve never held an honest job in my entire life. I’ve never done any hard labor. I’ve never worked nine to five . . . I come from a boardwalk town that is tinged with just a little bit of fraud. So am I.” (Springsteen on Broadway, Netflix)

Springsteen writes songs about racing cars—Racing in the Street, Backstreets, and Thunder Road. Bruce was in his twenties before he learned to drive. He was still riding a bicycle when he began singing about drag racing. He never raced cars.

He writes songs about gangs. He was never in a gang. He writes songs about factories. He never worked in a factory.

Springsteen says, “Standing before you is a man who has become wildly and absurdly successful writing about something about which he has had absolutely no personal

experience. I made it all up!”

“Bruce Springsteen” is a brilliant disguise. Bruce could be the patron saint for most Christians. Our commitment to Christ is tinged with just a little bit of fraud. For 2000 years, the church has been successful even though most of the church’s members have limited personal experience living like Christ.

Jesus tells us to care for the poor, but not many have invited a homeless person into their home. Jesus tells us to love one another, but not many have taken a lower-paying job in order to love more people. Jesus tells us to feed the hungry, but not many have taken out a loan to buy food for starving children.

Most of what we know about following Jesus comes from what we have heard or read. We come to church and talk about Christ. The idea of following Jesus in Brooklyn in 2023 seems unrealistic. We have enough on our plate just getting through the day. Our jobs are complicated. Our relationships are complicated. Our living situations are complicated. We have enough to do just to keep it together without some overwhelming commitment to live like Christ.

We like being Christian at a certain level. We like learning about faith. We like to think about following Jesus. Occasionally we try something new because we are Christians, but mostly we stick to what is normal. We do not want to stick out too much.

When it comes to caring for God’s neediest children, we are dabblers in the down and out. We do good things now and then. We aim for a reasonable amount of charity. We keep our distance from really hard stuff. We might get

to a greater commitment someday.

We just sang, This Little Light of Mine— “Everywhere I go, I’m gonna let it shine. All through the night, I’m gonna let it shine.”

That is a bit much. We shine some places, sometimes, but not everywhere, and not all night. Springsteen could be our patron saint, because he sings about what he has not experienced.

Or it could be Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a religious, political leader, a big deal. He makes a good living as an expert on God. Nicodemus knows how to explain the logical shortcomings in other people’s faith. He is not good at helping hurting people. He does not do the evil things you are not supposed to do, but he also does not do much that is surprising.

He does make a surprising visit to Jesus, but he does not come during the day. Visiting at night means he does not want to be seen. This is a little shady. Nic would rather stay off the record. He has questions he does not want to ask in front of his colleagues.

He visits Jesus because he is curious. He wants to talk, but that is it. He just wants to talk. He does not want to change his job, his politics, or his religion. He just wants to talk.

Jesus and the disciples are sitting outside after a long, hot day. They have finished dinner—fish again—when they hear Nicodemus making his way up the hill, twigs snapping under his feet. Jesus has a puzzled who-could-that-be-at-this-time-of-night look on his face.

Nic is not sure how to start. Jesus gestures for him to go ahead.

He begins, as the curious often do, with a compliment, “Jesus, we know that you’re a remarkable person with rare gifts for teaching.”

He wants to say, “Jesus, telling everyone to be kind is fine, but what’s your real deal?”

Jesus does not care for long, drawn-out analysis, so he cuts to the chase, “You like talking about religion, but what the whole thing boils down to is that unless you’re born from above, unless you let God change you, we might as well stop talking.”

Maybe Nicodemus has read the most books, but if he does not understand that God invites us to a different life, then he needs to start over.

This is not the response Nicodemus is expecting: “I came here for a serious theological discussion. I wanted to have a thoughtful conversation. What do you mean? How are you supposed to be born again when you’re pushing 70? How can you be born from above when it’s a challenge to get out of bed in the morning? It’s a little late for me to start over.”

Jesus explains, “The wind blows where it will, and you hear it, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it’s going. That’s how it is with everyone who’s born of the Spirit, everyone who lets God lead them in new directions.”

The new life that Jesus has in mind is beyond anything Nicodemus has in mind. The conversation is not going the way Nicodemus hoped. He wants a normal conversation, but Jesus wants him to have a different way of life.

Nicodemus’ last words to Jesus are for everyone who thinks of themselves as reasonably religious without going overboard: “How does this make sense?”

Jesus sounds surprised: “You’re a teacher and you don’t understand commitment. I’m trying to help you. I’m showing you the life to which I’m inviting you. I’m not suggesting more secondhand ideas. I’m talking about living with God’s love, and you keep procrastinating with questions that aren’t real questions. If I lay this out as plainly as I can and you don’t do anything different, why are we even talking?”

“God loves the world so much that God invites us to let go of our careful, data-gathering existence, in favor of a life that matters forever. God doesn’t want to point out how bad we are. God wants to show us a better way. The world is a mess because when God shines the light, we close our eyes. We stumble around in the darkness, because we would rather rationalize our self-centeredness than open our eyes. God helps us see who we are, who everyone else is, and what we’re doing here. God helps us find love, hope, and community.”

Nicodemus wants to trade a few ideas, but Jesus has a different idea.

Jesus says, “Believe in me. Turn your life upside down. Turn your mind inside out. Ride the wind. Be born again.”

Nicodemus understands that he is supposed to follow Jesus, but he has a lot to lose. He cannot bring himself to do it.

Nicodemus shows up again in the seventh chapter of John. The story is more of the same. Nicodemus and his associates have a heated conversation over what to do with Jesus. They act like they are going to arrest Jesus and have a guilty verdict five minutes later.

Nicodemus clears his throat and cautiously raises his

hand: “Our law doesn’t judge people without giving them a hearing, does it?”

The correct answer is, “Of course. Everyone gets a hearing.”

But Nicodemus’s colleagues are not in the mood for fairness, they are out for blood: “You sound like you may be on his side.”

And without another word, Nicodemus sits down. He will not stand up to them. He will not use his power for justice. He will not get in trouble.

The last time we hear of Nicodemus, Jesus is dead. Nicodemus comes to the cemetery with a hundred pounds of perfume to anoint the body. It is an extravagant gesture, but it is too much too late.

History has been strangely kind to Nicodemus. He is considered one of the good Pharisees. Maybe we are generous to Nicodemus, because he is like us.

He finishes his conversation with Jesus and goes back to his old life. He is not planning to sell what he has to give to the poor. He is not going to tell his neighbor that he is a follower of Jesus. He is not ready to trade his life of comfort and privilege for the life of discipleship. Nic watches Jesus from a distance. If everyone read the Bible, joined a church, and said hello to their neighbors, if everyone was as decent as Nicodemus, the world would still need people to follow Jesus.

God invites us to be open to God’ Spirit, celebrate God’s presence, listen for God’s leading, and ask, “Where are the winds of the spirit blowing?”

What would God have us do? What does it mean to be authentically Christian? What is the difference between

being interested in Christianity and being a follower of Christ? What is the difference between being a fraud and being real?

Which brings us back to Bruce Springsteen. What if Bruce is a fraud? What if Bruce does not care about the people he sings about?

What would happen if, as Kyle Smith suggested (National Review, December 23, 2018), we found out that his real name was “Bryce Springfield IV, Duke of Bedford, that he’d grown up riding horses, attending Oxford, and had a double major in Russian and chemistry.”

Would we dismiss him as a charlatan and stop showing up for his concerts? Would it be a career-ending scandal? The songs would still be the songs. They would still be thoughtful and challenging.

We should demand authenticity. Bruce has to tell the truth when he sings about faith, hope, love, alienation, yearning for more, defying authority, and longing for a better day. He has to be genuinely angry about betrayal, lying, and selling out.

Bruce says he is a fraud, but he really did grow up working-class in a poor New Jersey town. He did not have a factory job, but his father did, at the Ford factory, the plastics factory, and the coffee factory. When Bruce sings, the stories he tells are about his father’s life.

Springsteen explains, “When I was a young man and looking for a voice to sing my songs and to tell my stories, I chose my father’s voice, because there was something sacred in it.”

That is how he learned to tell the truth. This is how he describes Freehold, New Jersey, and the smell of coffee that wafted over the town from the Nescafé plant:

“There was a place here where people made lives and where they worked and where they danced. And where they enjoyed small pleasures and played baseball and suffered pain. Where they had their hearts broken, and where they made love, had kids. Where they died, and where they drank themselves drunk on spring nights. And where they did their very best, the best that they could to hold off the demons, outside and inside, that sought to destroy them.”

None of us is going to be Jesus, but you and I can live the truth of Christ. We can be real. We can care. We can treasure authenticity. We can live the truth about faith, hope, love, alienation, yearning for more, defying authority, and longing for a better day. We can be genuinely angry about betrayal, lying, and selling out.

We are frauds when compared to Christ, but Christ is not a fraud. We accept the hope of following Christ. We sing our songs in Christ’s voice, because there is something sacred in it. We tell the truth about ourselves, the ways we fall short, and the ways we are learning to love our family, our town, our people, people who work and dance, who enjoy small pleasures and suffer pain, whose hearts are broken by the people they love, who have been broken by death, and who do their best to hold off the demons that try to destroy them. We follow Christ, die to self-serving ways, and are born again in the life of the Spirit.

sermon © Brett Younger