

## Sermon for March 12, 2017

### What is your “gnaw”?

#### John 3:1-7

#### The Reverend Roger Pancost

Biblical Scholar, Walter Brueggemann, offers insights into the story of Nicodemus’ visit to Jesus, by putting it in a modern day setting. Brueggemann writes:

“Maybe (Nicodemus) went to see Jesus out of curiosity. But likely this was more, because it was a huge public relations risk to make the night venture. I suspect that Nicodemus – lawyer, scholar, politician, CEO, whatever he was – had a gnawing concern that made him climb into his limousine and seek out Jesus. He had everything, and he wondered, “Is that all there is? Is there something more? Is there something different? Am I on the right track?” Well, what would motivate a big-time public winner to such a secret meeting? It must have been a *gnaw* about reality.

Jesus knows this is no idle curiosity. And so like a good therapist, Jesus hones in on Nicodemus, disregards his dossier and his portfolio and reaches toward his gnawing sense of deficiency. Jesus says to him: “You’ve got to start over! You’ve got to be reborn. You’ve got to be born again. You’ve got to be born from above. You’ve got to become as vulnerable and innocent and dependent as a little child. You’ve got to forego your social position, your achievements, your wealth, your reputation. You’ve got to let go of all the things that make you self-sufficient and that alienate you from the wonder of the gift of God. Start over in vulnerability, in innocence, and in dependence, for the way you are living now keeps you cut off – in your arrogant security – from all the gifts of life for which you so much yearn.”

(A Way Other Than Our Own: Devotions for Lent, Walter Brueggemann, Westminster John Knox Press, 2017, pp. 34-35)

Unlike Nicodemus, as described by Walter Brueggemann, most of us don’t ride around in limousines, nor do we feel as though we have everything. And yet...and yet...like Nicodemus, many of us have a “gnaw” about reality.

For some people this “gnaw” has to do with the question: “Is this all there is to life?” Such an individual may have worked hard all of his or her life to be

successful. He or she may be well-respected by others, and is surrounded by material comforts. And yet, that person has a sense that something is missing.

For some people this “gnaw” is connected to the sorrow that he or she observes in the world. This individual has watched loved-ones suffer emotionally and physically. They listen to the news and are overwhelmed by the many problems facing the world, such as famines, violence, and war.

For some people this “gnaw” is a matter of faith. This person has been taught by others what to think and what to believe. Life experiences, and different perspectives, cause this person to question what he or she has been taught. There is a gnawing feeling inside that maybe there is more to faith than what they have been told.

For some people this “gnaw” has to do with concern about the future. Some individuals wonder about the direction they should take. Others are filled with fear about the unknown.

Do you have a “gnaw”? Is there something that makes you feel unsettled? Are you seeking an answer to a question? Do you have concerns that keep you awake at night? Do you have a sense that there is more to life than what you experience in your daily living?

The season of Lent provides a wonderful opportunity for each one of us to reflect on the things in our lives that feel unsettled. Although we cannot physically meet with Jesus, we can share our “gnaws” with God. We can do this in the darkness of night, or in the light of day. Anywhere, and at any time, we can share our thoughts with God.

As we share our questions and our concerns with God, we hear the same invitation that was given to Nicodemus...“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” While some people hear this invitation to be born from above as a once in a life-time experience, I hear it as an invitation offered to us each day of our lives.

Being born from above means being changed so that you see things in a new way...not only with your eyes, but with your heart. When you see things in a new way you see God’s realm happening here and now. You feel God’s spirit deep inside you and all around you. That changes you and you become a person filled with new life.

This invitation invites you leave behind your preconceived notions about life

and faith. It requires that you open yourself to being vulnerable and trusting of God's presence. It means letting go of the belief that your value comes from the accomplishments that you have made, the possessions that you own, or the opinions of other people. It means claiming your identity as a beloved child of God.

Being born from above also means being empowered to share God's love with the world around you. In families it means treating others with respect, kindness and patience. In our places of work, and in our schools, this means, this means offering our support and encouragement to others. It means conducting business in ethical ways that are good for humanity and good for the earth. In the greater world it means sharing resources with those who are in need, speaking out against injustice, and working to create greater harmony and understanding between people.

Walter Brueggemann concludes his retelling of the Nicodemus story, saying:

“When the secret meeting is over, Nicodemus gets back into his limo and rides back to the city. He has work to do. But he leaves with these odd words pounding in his head:

*‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.’*”

Nicodemus understood this was no easy mantra. It was, rather, an invitation to be reborn – innocent, vulnerable, dependent – open to the wind, fixed on the one with the cross. He found his world had been opened and his old world contradicted. He wondered, ‘How could this be?’ He wondered whether his old self would be turned to a new self. And we, alongside him, also wonder.” (p.35)

