

Those of you with a Scandinavian background are certainly families with Sven and Ole jokes. Well this is a story about Ole and Bessie, but it's no joke. It was the early 1900's and Ole had taken his girlfriend Bessie on a picnic at Okauchee Lake near Milwaukee in Wisconsin. It was a hot summer day and their picnic site was an island two and a half miles from shore. Their only means of transportation was a rowboat. While on the island Bessie said she'd like to have a dish of ice cream. Ole, desiring to impress Bessie, decided to row to shore and get her ice cream. You don't have to think hard to realize that, of course, the ice cream melted by the time Ole had rowed two and a half miles on a hot summer day. Ole was not satisfied with this development and decided there must be a better way to propel a row boat. And so Ole Evinrude invented the outboard motor and in 1907 founded Evinrude Motors.

Necessity is said to be the mother of invention, and any young person in love will tell you it is a necessity to impress the object of his or her love. Invention also requires open-mindedness. An oar and an outboard motor have very little in common, but Ole Evinrude made it happen.

In our gospel reading we meet Nicodemus, an unimaginative fellow if ever there was one. The text tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. This means he should have been a religious expert and know all about the ways of God. He comes to Jesus and seeks to have a theological conversation with him. But the conversation starts off badly. We discover right at the beginning that Nicodemus wants is to have his preconceived notions of how God works confirmed. He starts off by saying what he knows about Jesus, "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."

At one level it seems like Nicodemus is on the right track. He's right, isn't he? Actually no. Technically he's right about Jesus but he's unknowingly trying to put Jesus in a theological box of his own making. He thinks he knows how God works, but he doesn't.

Jesus immediately begins to try to undo Nicodemus' certainty. He says no one can see clearly anything about what God is up to unless one is born again, or born from above. "Born again" has become a sort of code phrase among some Christians, but what it's become is not what Jesus intended.

He's trying to tell Nicodemus that he needs to have a whole new and different understanding of God. Sort of like Nicodemus can only think of getting a boat across a lake by rowing. Jesus wants him to see that there are other options - an outboard motor, or a sail.

Nicodemus' understanding of God is actually a lot like a rowboat. If you want to get somewhere you have to provide the power yourself. Jesus wants Nicodemus to drop the idea of his effort getting him anywhere and instead realize that it's God's power that will move the boat.

Look at some of Jesus other words to Nicodemus: "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." Who's in control there? Certainly not humans. And another example. Jesus says, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up..." referring to his crucifixion. Who's doing the lifting up? Does Jesus say, "You must lift the Son of Man up?" No. He just says the Son of Man will be lifted up.

Consider also the ever famous John 3:16, "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." How much human work or control is there in that statement? None. The boat is moving by an outboard motor - God's motor, not humans straining at the oars.

Jesus wants to open Nicodemus to what is possible, not what he thinks he's figured out.

Today is Confirmation Sunday, and it's also Holy Trinity Sunday. Now anyone who believes they've "figured out" the Trinity is welcome to come up here right now and explain it. Of course none of you will come forward. I hope in confirmation class that our confirmands *were not taught* how to figure God out. We have taught them *about* God, but not in a way that restricted their understanding, but opened their understanding.

No one can understand God. If they think they do they're wrong. They're extremely narcissistic as well, but that's a different issue.

If our confirmands have learned nothing else, I hope it is this. Faith isn't a closed door. It is an open possibility.

God is up to new and innovative things all the time. Just because it hasn't happened in the past that doesn't mean it won't happen in the future.

Look again at our gospel reading. When Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." I mentioned before that this refers to the crucifixion. As 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians let's not forget what that meant to Jews in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. Jews believed that crucifixion was not only gruesome and horrible, it was also a cursed way to die. Cursed means rejected by God. When a Jew saw a body on a cross it was earthly proof to them that God had totally and utterly rejected that person forever - damnation at its surest.

Yet this cursed way to die becomes the vehicle God uses for salvation. Someone like Nicodemus couldn't begin to grasp that, but that was God's way. What is the disclaimer on financial investments? "Past performance does not guarantee future returns." It's a way for the investment company to let you know the risk involved. You may lose the money. But in the case of God it is that future returns may be amazingly greater.

The only way to fail at being confirmed is to close your life to the new possibilities God is up to. Meda Stamper, a pastor in England notes this, "When we become too sure of what we know about Jesus (or indeed the Trinity on this particular Sunday), when we believe that we have grasped him at last, that is when we can perhaps expect to be undone like Nicodemus. That undoing - that overturning of our certainty - may be a very good thing it is allows us to experience anew the miracle of our birth from above into eternal life, which has nothing to do with what we know or what we are. It is a gift of life from the heart of the Father, breathing the Spirit wind over us and through us, and opening our infant eyes to the Son, or Teacher, lifted up to draw all people to himself and his lesson of love.

So, confirmands, as you are about to affirm your baptism you do not make a promise that locks your future into a set of beliefs. You open yourself to new possibilities. Maybe your parents' faith is like a rowboat. That's okay, but a sail or outboard motor may be for you. Or, maybe something else not yet invented that God will bring into being through you.

Finally, let's not forget to have fun with our faith in God too, and remember that the real work of salvation is done for us by God's more-than-capable hands! Amen