

Have you ever played simple mind games with someone? Probably so. Here's an old one that you probably know. (I'll give John CiPollina credit for reminding me of it.) If the letters t, w, a, were a word, how would you pronounce it? And most people, sensing a trap, think a moment and say "twa?" And if t,w,e were a word how would you pronounce that? "Twe." And if t,w,i were a word? "Twi." And t,w,o? Of course the answer is two, but stuck in a thinking pattern sometimes you can trick someone into saying "tw-o."

That little trick plays on a deep function of our brains. It seems like we are hard-wired to recognize patterns. We can take just tiny bits and scraps of information and put them together in a way that creates a complete and sensible picture. 99% of the time we are right. But, like that little trick shows, once in a while we are wrong.

I think most of the decisions we make in our lives are made on very scant information. And I believe most of what we think we know about other people is mostly the work of our

imagination; subconsciously filling in the details. When news breaks about con-men like Bernie Madoff getting caught we are shocked that so many people could be so gullible as to fall for the scam. And yet, people had been blowing the whistle on him for years beforehand and no one would listen. He always had "proof" available. Based on that proof the whole thing looked remarkably real.

How often are you shocked to learn something about something or someone that you couldn't have dreamed possible? How many times have you heard TV interviews where someone says, "She was the perfect neighbor. I was shocked when I found out what she was really doing."

With that in mind, let's turn to Nicodemus and his encounter with Jesus. As we are looking at encounters with Jesus this Lenten season, when we come to Nicodemus we should remember this is an encounter between Jesus and a well-educated, open-minded religious leader. Nicodemus was of the class of Pharisees. Of all the religious and political divisions in first-century Judaism the Pharisees were the most liberal-minded. They were practical people who tried to hold on the

heritage of their faith while knowing there were certain limitations imposed by the fact that the Romans occupied there country and controlled them.

It appears to be the Pharisees that developed the idea of the synagogues. Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes and other groups didn't have synagogues. The Pharisees recognized that the temple in Jerusalem was the center of worship for the religion, but each community could have its own synagogue as a place of meeting and especially - learning. It is the synagogue system that the early Christian missionaries first used to spread the Christian faith.

For Pharisees, faith had a strongly intellectual component. Nicodemus was no exception. He knew the religious laws. He knew the teachings of the scriptures, what we would call the Old Testament. He knew prophesy, and he and others had pieced together lots of bits of information that gave them a complete picture: of what God was up to, of what God wanted from people, and of what the Messiah was sure to be like. Or so they thought.

Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus does not go smoothly. He starts off the conversation by saying, "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."

We find ourselves thinking, "Well done Nicodemus! You're on the right track. You've pieced together various bits of information and come up with a deep understanding of Jesus." But then again, maybe not.

Jesus replies, "Very truly," or at least that's our translations. In Greek it's, "Amen, amen, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Or it could be translated as, "being born again." And suddenly Nicodemus has no idea at all of what Jesus is talking about. We as Christians know. We know the full story of Jesus and we can laugh at Nicodemus' problems. But Nicodemus did not know the full story. He couldn't because it hasn't happened yet. He says something that makes perfect sense in his mind, but we know to be utterly ridiculous, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

We see Nicodemus' struggle to fit Jesus into the mold he is sure Jesus has to fit into. Nicodemus is educated. He's critically analyzed the situation. He's got to be right and he knows he's got to be right - except that he's totally wrong.

We won't go through the rest of the conversation verse by verse, but you can see the pattern that's emerging. Nicodemus never really manages to connect with Jesus. He's so sure of what he knows that he can't unlearn it. Ultimately Nicodemus will leave his encounter with Jesus in a state of uncertainty and confusion.

We meet Nicodemus two more times in John's gospel. This is chapter 3. In chapter 7 we find that there's a debate among Pharisees as to what to do with Jesus. He's causing problems among the people. Some want to arrest him, but Nicodemus defends him saying they have no grounds to arrest him. And then again in chapter 19 after Jesus has died Nicodemus appears again. He is working with Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus. He brings the typical burial spices that were used to mask the smell of decay. Except that he shows up with 75 pounds of

burial spices, and that's WAY too much! Biblical scholars believe that this excess is Nicodemus' way of showing his love and respect for Jesus.

The Bible tells us nothing of Nicodemus after the resurrection. We don't know what he did. I think however, it is reasonable to say that he does become a believer. But, I suppose I too am reading a lot into a few details.

The thing that Nicodemus should remind us of is our own tendency to create conclusions based on very scant evidence. When it comes to our lives of faith it can be bad to be sure that we know what we know.

The church throughout Europe and North America is undergoing tremendous changes right now. Many people are worried. Many are scared. Many think that Christianity is dying and they fear that many essential things will be lost.

Lutherans shouldn't have this fear. We have the Latin word *adiaphora* - or that which is not important for salvation. We

know that most of the things people are most up in arms about are adiaphora; it doesn't really matter. People are worried about forms and traditions. They're worried about their picture of Jesus dying. Perhaps they've become like Nicodemus and not known it.

It is good to know about God. It is good to know what God is up to. But it is also good to know what you don't know. It is good to know that no matter how smart we think we are, we really don't know what God is up to.

There are things we do know however, and there we do not bend, because we are right. And we are certainly right. The famous John 3:16 comes to mind as the encapsulation of what we know, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but may have eternal life." Amen