

“It’s Who You Know” (John 3:1-17)

Lent 2, February 17, 2008

When I was in seminary, an art exhibit called “The Splendor of Dresden” was doing the rounds. It wasn’t as big a deal as the “King Tut” exhibit, but it was still pretty big, and because of the German connection, I was interested in seeing it. The trouble was: the tickets were sold out way in advance. Sure, there were scalpers, but on my budget I couldn’t afford that, so it looked like I wouldn’t get in. Well, one Sunday morning I was bemoaning this fact to my friend, Linnea, who worked at the museum. “I know I should have looked into this sooner,” I said, “and I know nothing can be done about it now. Still...” You get the picture. Linnea listened patiently as I rambled on. Then she said, “I can get you in. In fact, how would you like to come with me to the opening?” My jaw dropped. “Are you kidding?” But no, she wasn’t. A few weeks later, there we were – me in my tux, she in her gown, mixing with big-wigs and millionaires. As we made our rounds, she whispered, “Enjoying yourself?” “You bet!” I said, “To think I didn’t even know how to get in, and now to enjoy all this! It’s great!” With a grin she said, “Just goes to show: it’s not what you know that counts. It’s who you know!”

Access is a wonderful thing, isn’t it? Knowing just the right person to get you into where you want to go! And maybe it seems so wonderful because it is so rare. We may dream of having special access, but we don’t really expect it. If we want tickets, we expect to stand in line like everyone else. If we want a promotion, we expect to work hard and wait our turn. So it goes. It would be nice to have special access. It would be nice to have someone to open doors for us. But most of us don’t expect to be the kind of people who can say from experience, “It’s not what you know that counts. It’s who you know!”

But wait just a minute! This may be true in most cases, but we actually do have special access where it counts the most. We do know just the right Person to get us into where we ultimately want to go – assuming that’s heaven! For isn’t that what Jesus does? Get us into heaven. Isn’t that what Jesus does by grace and grace alone? None of us could earn our way to heaven. The more we know the Bible – and our own heart – the more we know that for sure. But because of Jesus, we don’t have to earn our way to heaven. He paid the price in full on the cross. Because of Jesus, we don’t have to earn our salvation. He offers it as a gift. Just believe and receive. That’s the promise. That’s our access. Just believe in Jesus, that is. He’s the one who gives us access. The most famous verse in the Bible makes clear that it’s not what you know that counts, it’s Who you know, “**for God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life.**”

The truth is: what we know can only take us so far in this life – and not nearly far enough to be sure of the life to come. Yet isn’t it interesting how much human religion focuses on what we know, not Who? **Nicodemus** in today’s Gospel was hardly unique in thinking that if you study the Bible real hard and learn all you can about God, then you’ll have a strong, healthy faith. But it didn’t work that way for

him, did it? In spite of all He knew about God, Nicodemus still felt like something was missing inside; he felt an emptiness in his heart, a longing in his soul. And then he heard about Jesus – His teachings, His miracles. Nicodemus wondered: *Could this young Rabbi perhaps enlighten me?* He hoped so, and that's what led him to seek out Jesus. He went in the dark of night. After all, he was a religious leader. He couldn't have people thinking there was some spiritual truth he didn't know! But first and foremost, Nicodemus was a man, a human soul, one who yearned for... What? Some spiritual truth he didn't know!

But soon enough that would change! His talk with Jesus covered a lot of new ground. The need for spiritual rebirth – that was new. The way the Spirit works – that was new. The offer of eternal life as a gift – that was definitely new and must have got Nicodemus thinking. Was it possible that all his efforts were not enough to earn him a place in heaven? I wonder if this question reminded him of what he already knew from Isaiah 64 – that to God **“all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”** So if all his righteous acts were not enough to save him, was it possible that he needed outside help – a Savior? And that God meant for him to have a Savior? I wonder if this question reminded him of what he already knew from Isaiah 53, where God promised to send One who would be **“wounded for our transgressions”** and **“crushed for our iniquities;”** One who would **“make many righteous”** because *He* would **“bear their sins.”** As Nicodemus talked with Jesus, what he knew brought him quite a ways. It made him realize that what he knew could never be enough to save him. Now he needed to know who could save him from his sins, who could reconcile him to the Father, who could give him access to everlasting life. Not what but who! And then he found out. It was Jesus who could do this – Jesus sitting across from him. And Jesus would do this. That was why He had come – not just teach him or impress him but to save him. Yes, that was why Jesus had come: Because **“God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life.”**

In that moment, Nicodemus learned: *“It's not what you know that counts, it's Who you know.”* Some 2,000 years later this is still the heart of our Christian faith. We do not proclaim disembodied doctrines. Our religion is intensely relational. We do not proclaim a way, a truth, or a life. We proclaim Jesus, who is **“the way, the truth, and the life.”** To be sure, what we know about Jesus is important – that He is not just a man but God incarnate; that He didn't just live and die, but died to pay for our sins and rose again to guarantee us eternal life. Yes, what we know about Jesus is important, but infinitely more important is knowing Jesus personally – having a relationship with Jesus, a trust relationship, a faith relationship. No one can be saved by a doctrine, only by a real, flesh-and-blood Savior. There is no grace without Jesus, no forgiveness without Jesus, no heaven without Jesus. *“It's not what you know that counts, it's Who you know.”*

Now, to those who don't know Jesus, this may sound rather narrow. And I don't dispute that is. Jesus Himself said the way to eternal life is narrow. But to those

who do know Jesus, this personal relationship not only makes sense, it makes all the difference in the world. For instance, when I wake up in the morning, how glad I am it is not just a doctrine I turn to for help with the day or even a theoretical God-out-there. I get to talk to a real Person – a Person I know quite well; a Person who's ready to hear me and help me even if my prayer is not theologically precise. And as I go through the day, how glad I am it is not just a doctrine I follow. No, it's a Person – a Person to whom I am profoundly grateful, a Person who always seeks my good, a Person whose guidance may not be easy to follow, but whose love makes me want to try. And when I mess up, how glad I am to have more than a doctrine to fall back on! Again, it's a Person I can ask to forgive me – a Person who paid for my sins on the cross, a Person whose nail-pierced hands reach out to pick me up, dust me off, and give me a fresh start. And when I visit someone who has lost a loved one or who is near to death themselves, how glad I am to have more than a doctrine to offer them! Right in the room with us there is a Person who can comfort them as no doctrine can, a Person who can strengthen them as no doctrine can, a Person who can assure them as no doctrine can **“that neither death nor life...nor anything in all creation will be able to separate” them “from the love of God.”** For this Person – well, His love is not just a theory. It's proven, tested love. This Jesus – His love is not just a concept. It's real, relational love. It's love so broad, so deep, so high that He loves each one of us as if there were the only one of us to love. And it does make a difference! This love, this relationship – it does make a difference! Not just knowing about it. Unh uh. Knowing Jesus personally makes the difference; trusting in Him, depending on Him. Both here and hereafter, it's not what you know that counts, it's Who you know!

This really came home to me one Christmas Eve years ago. A young man stayed after the late service and asked to talk with me. I was tired, but I figured that if something was troubling him, I wanted to help, so we just sat down right there in the church. As he began to talk, though, it was more about theology – rather heady theology. In fact, it seemed like his goal was to correct my theology. Now, I have my insecurities, but not when it comes to theology. So I just let him talk, figuring that when he was done I would set him straight and go home. But the more he talked, the more I realized: this is not really about theology. Something more was going on. And a few probing questions bore that out. The truth was his wife had just left him. The deeper truth was that he had driven her away. And the deepest truth was that he was floundering inside. To look at him, you would never guess this. Well-groomed, well-dressed, this guy looked like he had it all. And outwardly, perhaps he did. But for all he thought he knew about theology, something was missing inside. There was an emptiness in his heart, a longing in his soul – not unlike Nicodemus. And that was when the conversation turned from talk about Jesus to Jesus Himself. I won't share all the details, but suffice it to say that there in that church, in the wee hours of Christmas morning, this young man met Jesus for the first time. He talked to Jesus person-to-person. He laid out his problem to Jesus person-to-person. He asked Jesus to forgive him and help him and be his Savior. He got to know

Jesus person-to-person. And the relationship continued to grow. In January, he came to an adult information class – and surprise-surprise, my theology wasn't so bad after all! Confirmation followed. He became active in our church. And when he moved out of the area, I was glad to hear he soon got connected with a new church. In fact, he's become an adult Sunday School teacher. But even when he teaches the headiest theology, can you guess what point he emphasizes to his class? *It's not what you know that counts; it's Who you know!*

So what's *my* point this morning? When the service is over, I don't know what you will take home with you, but I do know Who will go home with you, and I just want you to enjoy the full blessing of your relationship with Jesus. So when you pray, for instance, make the most of the special access He gives you. It's not everyone who can say, **"If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us."** And when you face challenges, take full advantage of the help and guidance He offers you. It's not everyone who can say, **"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."** When you mess up, as we all do, don't be afraid to claim the forgiveness He promises you. It's not everyone who can say, **"If we confess our sins, He will be faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."** Even when you read your Bible, don't just hear it as information about the Lord; hear it as a message from the Lord – a message to you, His special friend. Yes, knowing about the Lord is important, but ultimately it's not what you know that counts; it's Who you know! After all, the good news is not: *God so loved the world that He gave a theory of salvation.* Nor: *God so loved the world that He gave a doctrine of grace.* No, **"God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life."** Amen.