



Whenever you go to the doctor, among the first things they do is to measure your height and your weight. Your height is used, among other things, to calculate your body mass index- BMI- which is an important indicator of where you fit statistically – and a measurement that can help a doctor evaluate which medical risks you may face.

Growth- it's important to know when you're growing taller as well as when you're shrinking, which most of us do as we age. Especially when we're little, growing too tall too fast may not be sustainable. It may lead to brittle bones, fractures and other negative consequences. Slow and steady growth is usually better.

Nicodemus makes his first appearance with Jesus when he comes at night to speak with Jesus. Nicodemus was a leader and a learned man. Perhaps he wasn't quite sure that Jesus was really who he seemed to be and that's why he came at night. He didn't want to be embarrassed if what he thought was true- that Jesus could do what he thought Jesus was doing because Jesus came from God turned out not to be true. Nicodemus didn't want to jeopardize his standing in his community if Jesus was a fake.

It's a rather odd exchange. Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus at night and says: "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." A statement- not a question. An acknowledgment of what Nicodemus and others appear to "know." And how does Jesus respond: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Where does that come from? How is that a response to Nicodemus's statement: "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God"?

Nicodemus now seems to play the straight man: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" A literal response to a figurative or metaphorical statement by Jesus. Jesus has said something that defies common sense in our physical realm. If the doctor says that I have grown an inch- then I've grown an inch. That's an outward sign that may or may not reflect the inward reality. It's true that I've grown an inch physically but have I grown an inch (or more) spiritually?

Jesus responds to Nicodemus's disbelief- his literal response to Jesus' statement- by drawing this very distinction between flesh and spirit. "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." There is more to life than our physical shell. There is an inward life that is born of the Spirit. And where the Spirit will lead each of us is not determined by us but by the Spirit: "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."

Randall Zachman, who taught Reformation and Post Reformation theology at Notre Dame, cautions us about dismissing Nicodemus too quickly. He contends that Nicodemus might be a lot like us- someone who is at first intrigued by Jesus, and who, as he comes to know Jesus, is able to become more open about his faith.¹ Nicodemus is, Zachman contends, a "work in progress" as we meet him for the first time in this morning's reading from the Gospel of John.

The story of Nicodemus that we read today also reminds us to be cautious about "proof texting." Proof texting is taking a verse or two to put forth a position that may or may not be accurate when the whole of the Bible is considered. The text this morning has been the basis for some for insisting that without a specific type of baptism, one cannot be saved or go to heaven. The danger of using this text in this way is shown by Romans 10, verses 9 and 10: "If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved." So, be cautious of using one or two verses to put forward a position without considering the whole. **And, please** do not take this comment as suggesting that baptism is not important and desirable! This is just a caution about proof texting and seeing Nicodemus as simply one who was afraid to see Jesus in daylight because Nicodemus was afraid of losing his position of power and prestige in the community.

Nicodemus appears twice more in the Gospel of John. The next time we read about Nicodemus is in Chapter 7 when the dispute about who Jesus is heats up. In this portrait of Nicodemus, we learn that he is with the Pharisees when the Pharisees are upset because the temple police have not arrested Jesus. Nicodemus asked why Jesus would be arrested when he has not had a hearing. "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" Nicodemus has at least acknowledged that Jesus should not be arrested or condemned without following their own law and practice. And for voicing this concern, Nicodemus is berated.

The third and last time we see Nicodemus is following the death of Jesus on the cross. Nicodemus brings 100 pounds of spices to assist Joseph of Arimathea. The two men wrapped the body of Jesus with the myrrh and aloes and wrapped it in linen cloth (John 19:38-40). Nicodemus has gone from coming to Jesus at night to speaking out in the presence of the Pharisees to call them to follow their own law with respect to arresting Jesus to anointing the body and placing Jesus in the tomb. Nicodemus has grown in his faith. His growth cannot be measured on a growth chart because physical growth is not the point. The point is his spiritual growth- inward and ultimately shown in outward acts.

¹ Randall Zachman in Feasting on the Word Year B vol. 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 46.

Zachman says that “faith receives eternal life from the death of the Son of Man, because it is found in the self-giving love of God for the world... The self-giving love of God in Christ cannot be accepted without illuminating our lives from the inside out, revealing to us that our old life not only is from below but also is filled with deep darkness that opposes the light of the love of God.”²

It’s fun to measure our child’s growth with a chart where we can mark the inches and have a tangible reminder that he or she is getting taller- and may indeed one day surpass our own height. How many of us have pictures that show that first time our child is now taller than we are? Those pictures bring smiles to our faces even as we acknowledge that they represent life changing. Physical growth is important if we are to attain our place in the world and function as an adult.

Spiritual growth cannot be measured on a chart. It is invisible but shown through how we live our life and how we treat each other. Jesus reminds us that we do not know where the Spirit comes from or where it is going. We can be confident, however, that the Spirit is present and the Spirit is alive.

Consider the child’s growth chart as a metaphor for our own spiritual growth. Where are you on the chart? Are you still growing? I hope so. *Amen.*

² Id, 48.