

I've Got This – A Message to PLWC

I wanted to start today's message with a story as this is my first church message since returning to doing some substitute teaching late last year. I was presenting a rubric project on the periodic table to my thirty some eleventh and twelfth grade chemistry students in a local school district. Please note that this was my first day back as a teacher or in any school in over thirty years. This school uses a six day calendar and block scheduling so this group ends up with a double period for the semester. After explaining the assignment and my expectations for success, I split the class into six independently working groups. I then designated team leaders for each one and then walked around to every group to answer specific concerns unique to each listing of elements that they were investigating.

As time in the period grew short, I made my way to the last group studying group I elements like hydrogen and helium and there I met team leader Amy (not her real first name). With her legs propped up on the back lab table like a corporate executive, she at first ignored me while staring intently at her cell phone. First, let me tell you a little about Amy. She sits in the back of the room by herself. She is also dressed entirely in black including her hair and nail polish. In a different reality, she could have been Johnny Cash's great granddaughter. Choosing cooperation over confrontation, I decided to interrupt her video game and asked her what I could do to help her get started on her assignment. Simultaneously looking up at me with an eye roll and a glare, she responded to her substitute teachers' question with all of the disdain that an eighteen year old teen can muster stating – I've got this! She further explained that the period was almost over and she planned a more dedicated approach with her group in

tomorrow's class. I chose a simple OK over a discipline referral sheet and a trip for Amy to the high school office. The bell rings, the class gets up out of their chairs, the room empties quickly, and my last class and my first day come to an end. I will come back to this story just a little later in today's message.

Getting back to the church, I read an internet article by Bill Wilson of Baptist Global News stating the top ten reasons that people do not go to church. In his poll of individuals from April 2015, he cites "athletic events, commitment, exhaustion, holidays, illness, children, parents, travel, vacations, and work" as rationale that keeps them away from houses of worship. In another internet article by Carey Nieuwhof from April 2014, he cites Barna research indicating his top five reasons that people don't go to church include "an irrelevant church served by hypocritical and immoral leaders, churches where God is missing, churches that prohibit legitimate doubt, and churches where people do not learn about God nor experience community." Perhaps you have a top five or top ten listing of what you feel keeps people from attending our worship services.

Now back to my story for a moment. I submit to you that like my high school senior Amy, people are neglecting church in particular and the gospel in general because they too think "I've got this." I've chosen the third chapter of John for our study this morning because our society and culture is not unique in its rejection of God's claims. That once upon a time, a whole nation was blinded by a type of religion as I believe our own nation is blinded today. The time was the first century of the Common Era (or AD for old timers such as myself), the nation was Israel as ruled by the Romans, and the man was Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night.

First, let's look at why people held Nicodemus in high regard. The Scriptures teach that he was a Pharisee indicating that he was a strict adherent to the Old Testament law. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council indicating he possessed the skills of leadership and was an individual who was respected by a majority of the people and the leadership of the time. He was called "Israel's teacher" by Jesus himself making him to theological studies what Stephen Hawking is to physics today. In other words, He's da man! He is a contemporary of Annas and Caiaphas who served rotating shifts as chief priests of the temple. But yet one evening this man must have felt very inadequate and sought out the itinerant teacher who had been rejected by his peers as a liar or insane. I believe that the very same concerns that troubled Nicodemus so greatly that he would come to Jesus are the same issues that will bring people of our generation to the realization that Jesus is Lord today. Let me suggest three ways we can do that in our conversations with people today.

First of all, I think we need to "**Maximize the Miracles**." By some accounts, the Gospels record about three dozen miracles that involved the ministry of Christ. These include a miraculous conception and a miraculous star, the feeding of five thousand and the calming of a storm, demons sent into pigs and the raising of Jairus' daughter, the healing of a sick woman and a paralytic, a leper cleansed at Gennesaret, and the restoration of a shriveled hand, the healing of a boy with an evil spirit as well as Peter's mother in law, Jesus walking on water and blind Bartimaeus receiving sight, four thousand people are fed and a fig tree is cursed, a centurion's servant is healed from afar and a girl is freed from a demon, an evil spirit is sent out of a man and a mute demoniac is restored, a blind man receives sight at Bethsaida and a coin is found in a fish's mouth, a widow's son is raised

and a crippled woman is healed, a man born blind is healed and an official's son is healed at Cana, water is turned into wine and a man's severed ear is restored, ten lepers are healed and Lazarus is raised from the dead, another sick man is healed and miraculous catch of fish is recorded.

In so much of normal conversation, we hear attempts to explain the miracles of old with new scientific explanations. They suggest a strong wind caused by climatic conditions is what actually parted the Red Sea allowing the children of Israel to cross. They suggest a more limited flood occurred because no natural explanations could explain a truly global catastrophe. The star of Bethlehem was a supernova or perhaps the normal rising of one of the planets of the solar system. The story of the Ark is laughed about because science teaches us that all the animals could not fit in one small sailing craft. Doesn't the very fact that these occurrences impossible make them the miraculous? Indeed it was the miracles that Nicodemus was seeing that brought him to the Messiah by night. Let'

Next, we should look to the "**Deity Declaration**" of Christ as Messiah which led Nicodemus to his logical conclusion that Jesus was truly a teacher sent by God because He was the Son of Man – The Son of God. In our text from John 3:13, the Bible says "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. Let's look at the bible passages from the website Bible Gateway that either state or imply the divinity of Jesus Christ. Mark 1:1 directly states that Jesus is the Son of God. In Luke 11:35, the angel tells Mary that her son would be the Son of God. In John 1:34, John the Baptist says the same thing. The declaration of Nathaniel is made in John 1:49 when Jesus told him he saw him

under the fig tree. In John 11:27 Martha believed he was the Son of God, and in Matthew 27:54, the centurion made the same observation. Jesus claimed that he said so in John 10:36 and again implied it in John 11:24. The demons declare that He is God's son in Matthew 8:29, Mark 3:11, and Luke 4:41 and John 20:11 states that the purpose of the book was to convince the readers that Jesus was the Son of God. The charge that the religious leaders brought against him at his trial was that he claimed to be the Son of God in Matthew 27:43 and in John 19:7 and for all intents and purposes admitted to in Luke 22:70. Finally, in Matthew 16:15-17, the Bible declares "He said to them, who do you say that I am"? Simon Peter answered "you are the Christ – the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered him "You are blessed Simon, Son of Jonah because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in Heaven!"

When asked by others, we cannot meekly reply that Jesus was just a great teacher, an incredible visionary, or a moral spokesperson declaring things that are good and righteous. The declaration of divinity is imperative if we are to impact our world with the truth that changed Nicodemus.

Finally, I feel we need to emphasize an "**Endless Eternity**" if we are to impact the next generation in the manner that Nicodemus was able to accomplish. Jesus spoke of Nicodemus' lack of understanding when he stated in John 3:12 "I have spoken to you of earthly things, and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" He also stated in an earlier verse "flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear the sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or whether it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

The heavenly or spiritual domain cannot be directly perceived by our senses. We need to inspire those who would ask us about the Gospel by expressing that life is more than the temporal. In fixating on the scientific method and all that reason can offer, it is possible to neglect that there is more than the here and now. Perhaps the world is more open to this type of discussion if a loved one is very ill or has recently passed away, but the great hope that Christ offers is encouragement for all living people at any time. The Pharisees, to whom Nicodemus was loyal, were great rule keepers. Where the bible was silent, they added their own rules. But eternity in heaven is more than following the rules – it is about building a relationship with the One who wrote the rules.

So let's wrap up with a few practical matters concerning whether we've got this. I think it is important that as we share the message that we testify instead of terrify. We need to offer consolation over condemnation. We must share jubilation over desperation. We can **maximize the miracles**, we can make a **deity declaration**, and we can share about an **endless eternity**.

Did I leave you wondering how things worked out with chemistry student Amy? I don't know the full ending myself. The next day she came in working very hard with her group. They were researching data on their cell phones, they were drawing posters to represent concepts. She and her group were planning presentation models using voice and power point to demonstrate their mastery of the topic. They were asking me good questions as I led the class.

As a teacher, we were trained to "catch a kid doing something good" and provide positive reinforcement. I went over to Amy near the end of the class and I asked her what made the difference in her work ethic. She looked up at me and

with the most sincere expression and asked if I thought she was smart. I immediately responded that I knew that she was. She explained that many of her teachers underestimate her. She told me she was Harvard bound in the fall as she had been accepted there months ago. I told her I thought that she was so smart that she might “blow off” the assignment which I knew wouldn’t be best for her or for the group that she led. She smiled and I went on to the next group. The following Monday, the regular teacher came back and I never did get to see her group’s presentation.

So be patient when you’re told by others that they’ve got this – they might just surprise you.