

Trick Answers

Preached FCCW on March 8, 2020

John 3:1-17

A random group of people on the street were asked to solve this word problem: *“At a wedding, there were seventy-five guests and sixty-eight pieces of cake. How many didn’t”*

Everyone was confused because the question didn’t logically follow the information given. That’s because the question set them up to make a false assumption about what was being asked by using something called a homophone. In case you don’t remember your grammar school grammar lessons, homophones are words that sound the same but are spelled differently and have different meanings.

The homophones in this trick question are eight—as in the number that comes after seven—and ate—as in what you did with your breakfast this morning. The people in this exercise were told that there were 75 guests at this wedding. That set their minds up to be thinking in terms of numbers. So, when they were told that there were 75 guests and 68 pieces of cake, the power of suggestion tricked them into assuming sixty-eight was the number of cake slices. It never registered to them that what was actually being said was that there were 75 guests and sixty of the guests *ate* a piece of cake. If it had, the question of “How many didn’t” would have made perfect sense. All they would have to do is subtract sixty from seventy-five to answer correctly that fifteen guests didn’t eat cake.

Are you with me?

Jesus was no stranger to being asked trick questions. The more his popularity grew, the more determined those who opposed him became in their efforts to publicly discredit him. One of their favorite tactics was using cleverly worded questions to get him to answer in a way that would make him look bad. But Jesus almost never gave direct answers to their questions. Instead he answered their questions with a question of his own. And when they answered his questions to them, it was they who found themselves looking bad. Or, at least realizing how much they still had to learn. You might say then, that Jesus had a habit of replying to trick questions with trick answers.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and the Pharisees were one of the groups that were always getting into these kinds of exchanges with Jesus. Nicodemus himself however, wasn’t as convinced as some of his brother Pharisees were, that Jesus was a fraud who needed to be exposed. He privately questioned how an imposter could possibly do the miraculous things that Jesus was doing.

So, one night, he secretly visited Jesus under cover of dark. Nicodemus greeted Jesus 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.” Which was Nicodemus’ way of opening the door to asking Jesus all the questions he hoped would reveal whether Jesus really was a teacher sent by God, or the fraud that many of his fellow Pharisees had made up their minds that he was.

As if he could read Nicodemus’ mind, Jesus gave a trick answer before Nicodemus had even asked a single question. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” But what Nicodemus heard was not “born from above” but “born again.” Which understandable because the same Greek word can have either meaning. Which got Nicodemus diverted onto asking a question about the anatomical impossibilities of literally being born again. Which Jesus answered with another seemingly irrelevant statement.

Do not be astonished that I have said to you, ‘you must be born from above.’

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with every one born of the Spirit.”

This was not an explanation that was especially helpful for Nicodemus. Because, the Greek word Jesus used – *pneuma* — means both wind and Spirit. What Jesus was trying to help Nicodemus see for himself was that the Spirit of God is as wild and unpredictable as the wind, that cannot be controlled by human assumptions about where it should blow. In fact, everything Jesus told Nicodemus that night amounted to his attempt to free Nicodemus’ mind from the cage of preconceived ideas about him. Because for all his intelligence and experience, Nicodemus still treated Jesus as a problem to be solved. If anything, his wealth of knowledge proved to be a barrier to “getting” Jesus.

There’s an old story that reminds me of this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. It’s a story about a young man in search of spiritual enlightenment. He too visited a renowned spiritual teacher. He said, “Teacher, please tell me the secret of enlightened living.” The Teacher said, “I will share with you the Truth you seek. But, first, let us sit down and have tea together.”

While the teacher prepared the tea and set the pot and cups on the table, the man did all the talking. He spoke of the wisdom he had acquired thus far by studying books written by philosophers and through conversations with the most respected thinkers. The Teacher listened silently as he began pouring tea into the man’s cup. When the cup was full, he kept pouring until hot tea spilled out of the cup and onto the young man’s hands and lap. The man leapt to his feet and cried out, “Sir, the cup is full. It can’t hold another drop!”

Only then did the teacher stop pouring. He set the teapot down and said, “Just as your cup is so full that it can hold no more without first being emptied, so you cannot receive true Enlightenment until you make room to receive it by emptying yourself of what you already think you know.”

Nicodemus arrived with questions for Jesus. Jesus’ answers showed Nicodemus that before he could receive answers to those questions, he had to allow himself to be teachable. He had to

empty himself of his literal, limited thinking before he could grasp the deeper mysteries of Jesus, and see the Kingdom of God. Jesus told Nicodemus that “what is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The Greek word he used for *flesh* means more than just our physical body. It describes a person’s earthly nature. That nature is not naturally equipped to arrive at a place of spiritual maturity through its own limited faculties. But it *is* designed to *receive* the wisdom that God makes known to us when we empty ourselves of our misguided assumptions about how God works.

I wonder how often WE are not hearing what Jesus says to US because of our own misperceptions and misbegotten assumptions. Maybe we are just as much in the dark when it comes to “getting” what Jesus is saying to us, as was Nicodemus.

If that’s the case, we can be grateful for the season of Lent. Lent invites us to go deeper in our attempts to listen and understand the things Jesus said and did that may confuse and challenge us. To acquire open minds like that of a newborn child, who is eager to absorb all there is to learn about life, unencumbered by layers upon layers of misperceptions.

Lent invites us to unlearn whatever obstructs our knowing what is of eternal importance. Beginning with what it means that God loves us so much that he sent his Son, not to condemn the world but to save it. So that, eventually loving God with all our heart, mind and soul, and loving our neighbor as much as we love ourselves, will be less tricky for us, as well.

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