

Sermon: John 3:1-7 : Nicodemus Now

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus^[a] by night and said to him, “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.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”^[b] ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.^[c] ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You^[d] must be born from above.’^[e]

We should be reminded, that in this Gospel, the Pharisee is not the bad guy or the foil for Jesus’ teaching. This has been a useful tool. Jesus speaking of and teaching to the Pharisees shows us how we, as humans, structure things, when left to our own devices, and decide what the hierarchy of what is good and what is bad, according to us. Pharisees, those interpreters of the law, the preservers of the understanding of the Torah, and founders of Rabbinical Judaism which continues to this day, are almost always held up as ‘not understanding’ the message that Jesus brings, in spite of all their learning. But not this time. This time, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to Jesus and asks his questions.

A lot is made of Nicodemus coming in the dark. But consider that at the end of Jesus’ life, Nicodemus is there. Only the disciples call Jesus “Rabbi.” Nicodemus appears to be comfortable with this word, address Jesus as Rabbi. Jesus answers in riddles, and in later verses, we do not read of Nicodemus’ frustration or rebuttal, we hear further, albeit, cryptic, discussion. Perhaps this isn’t about sneaking about in the dark, but about wanting to know more. Perhaps this isn’t about hiding one’s identity as a follower of Jesus but that, like most people, different aspects of his life are in play at different times. How far would we make it bringing our parent or child roles to a business meeting? Being born of the water and Spirit is first mentioned here, and Nicodemus appears to take it literally, resulting in a somewhat amusing exchange that just gets more cryptic. You can use the question, “Are you reborn?” as a sort of litmus test of religion – it

can be a question saying, “Are you in the club?” or “Are you one of those fanatical Christians?” But Jesus isn’t riddling, he’s telling the actual truth. And Nicodemus is confused, he needs more information. I am tempted to say here, ‘Je suis Nicodemus’, in the spirit of ‘Je suis Charlie’, and all the other movements that ally themselves with someone or something in particular. We are all Nicodemus.

The majority of the US does not identify as Christian anymore, and in Christian circles anyway, much is made of shrinking congregations, losing our youth, aging populations, seekers, and spiritual but not religious. In Estonia, the population is over 50% non-religious, and another 16% undeclared, making it the least religious country in Europe. The histories of these two countries, and how history is unfolding now, play into this, but I suggest that really, we’re just Nicodemus, whether or we’re actively going to church or not. People come to the Pharisees for interpretation and understanding, so he could influence their thinking. Nicodemus has a comfortable life, a good one, with prestige and power. Being a follower of Jesus could threaten that, but he has heard the Word, and wants to know more. So he seeks understanding. I suspect that like a lot of people now, someone made a book recommendation, or said, “you should go see this guy from Nazareth, he says the most amazing things.” But he can’t just show up at the next Ted Talk, these beliefs, explorations, meditations, and searching are neatly tucked into a mental box that he can take out when the day’s work is done, family tucked in for the night, and the mind can wander into new territory.

Jesus doesn’t leave Nicodemus sitting in the dark. He tells him what will guide him, Wisdom and Moses. Nicodemus is going to be thoroughly familiar with Moses, as the traditional author of the Torah, the first five books of our Bible, but Woman Wisdom, who mostly appears in poetry and song, may take Nicodemus’ mind to places it isn’t used to. Is coming out of the dark, going back into it, really the question? Nicodemus demonstrably puts his faith back into the compartment that it fits comfortably into in his life, and continues to go about his life, but the Spirit is at work in him. The Spirit is powerfully at work. There’s no certainty or epiphany that we can see, but he has more to chew on while it lays in bed, in the dark, thinking about

whether that bill was paid, should he get bread in the morning, and what did Jesus mean by reborn?

Nicodemus comes up to the teacher after the lecture, to ask a few clarifying questions, and like all good teachers, Jesus sends him away with even more questions, deeper more discerning ones. Nicodemus comes to get more information, and gets an answer that says this is not about facts, this is about faith. Jesus doesn't just say, "Open your eyes, man, LOOK at me, SEE me." Jesus patiently, perhaps a little bemusedly, answers, knowing that Nicodemus will find life when he looks to God, that he will be healed. Nicodemus' story can give us hope; he's here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he is there at the end of Jesus' life, and he's a lot like the most of us in how he lives with it. We're here because maybe we struggled with an idea, perhaps leaving or having left church and thinking of its relevance in our lives, and God gave us the ability to see, not just look, to have the faith to come, yet again, in spite of other obligations in life. Nicodemus doesn't drop everything like John and James, sons of Zebedee, and follow Jesus. But he does follow Jesus, in fact, follows Jesus into the darkness and Nicodemus asks his questions. and that gives us great hope. I personally fought being called to ministry because I could not walk away from my family, and I thought that was the only way to follow a call from God. The Spirit created paths that I could not have seen without faith, and the way I needed to follow, didn't involve walking away from worldly obligations. Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus shows us that dropping everything is not the only way; there's the questioning, confused, stumbling way to follow him. Our confidence in God takes us forward through that. God's love for us, showing us the way personally, with patient, exasperated, bemused answers that lead to more questions until suddenly we SEE the Cross before us and realize that we don't have to understand it, we don't need more information, that confidence in God is enough and He will do the rest.

The Spirit will come, in the dark, in the light, in silence and in a tempest, and will continue to bring us to new life, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,

Amen.