

“BEING A SEEKER: NICODEMUS AND JESUS”

Psalm 139:1-12; John 3:1-17

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Context for the gospel reading: This is early in John’s gospel, but in the previous chapter John has told his readers about Jesus’ confrontation with the moneychangers doing business in the temple grounds.... So we know already that Jesus is regarded by some people as a controversial figure willing to challenge the status quo.

Read John 3:1-17

It’s hard to look at this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus as a whole, because our attention is so grabbed by that one verse here that just about everybody knows. John 3:16 is probably one of the most memorized and often-quoted verses in all the Bible, although I suspect that many of those who memorize or quote it aren’t aware of its context in this longer conversation. Many of us love this verse as an eloquent encapsulation of the gospel: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” Others of us may not love it so much because we’ve seen it overused on signs in stadiums and misused to communicate not a message of grace and love and invitation, but a formulaic definition of what it means to be Christian, often tinged with a bit of judgement.

Like always, it really helps to put it in perspective.

Picture this late-night conversation. There’s something about late night conversations, isn’t there? They often get into those big, deep issues or the troubling questions we manage to push away amid the routines and responsibilities of the day. Late at night, we let our guard down a little. I think that might be what’s going on with Nicodemus.

We are told that Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a leader in that very observant religious community. He’s what we might call a public intellectual, a man who probably can boast of being successful and respected and influential. But something in him isn’t quite satisfied; something is tugging at him and keeping him up at night.

We aren’t entirely sure why Nicodemus seeks Jesus out at night. The most obvious explanation would be that he’s afraid of the consequences to his position and reputation if he should be seen talking with this controversial anti-establishment preacher. It could be that he hasn’t yet made up his mind about Jesus, and wants to avoid giving anyone the impression that he’s become a supporter. Maybe this is the only time of day he can catch Jesus alone for a quiet conversation; already Jesus has begun to have quite a following, John says in chapter two, because “they saw the signs that he was doing” – presumably healing people, though John doesn’t specify. But I think those anxieties and spiritual hungers that make themselves known in quiet, dark, sleepless hours also play a role in bringing Nicodemus to Jesus.

At any rate, Nicodemus comes at night. It's clear he is seeking ...something. He begins by saying, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." It's not a question. And yet, we hear that there's a question in it, don't we? Jesus heard it, too. The next thing we read is "Jesus answered him...." I hear it, but I'm not sure exactly what the question is. Maybe Nicodemus wasn't either. Is he asking, "are you really from God?" or "can you explain those signs?" ? Is he asking if Jesus can help *him* feel God's presence? Is he wondering if Jesus can answer some other questions that are bothering him?

Whatever it is, he doesn't come right out with it.

Jesus answer: "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." I don't know exactly what Jesus is driving at here but it sounds to me like he's suggesting that if Nicodemus is really able to perceive God's presence with Jesus, that might mean that a new life – the life of the Spirit – has already taken root in him.

Nicodemus isn't ready to admit this yet, so he pulls back and falls back on what I think has to be a deliberate misunderstanding. I mean, *we* know Jesus is speaking in metaphor here; he's not talking about literal birth but spiritual renewal. Nicodemus is a smart guy, so he has to know that, too. But he pretends not to get it, so Jesus elaborates a bit. The things he says about new life coming as a result of the movement of God's Spirit in us are similar to ideas from the prophet Ezekiel – so Jesus isn't being unreasonable when he wonders how Nicodemus can have missed them.

But Nicodemus' question at that point strikes me as the first honestly-from-the-heart thing he says: "How can these things be?" What? There's no formula for spiritual peace or enlightenment? I can't think or work or move myself into harmony with the creator? I'm not in control here? You aren't going to clarify what beliefs are essential or tell me what I have to do? I don't get answers to my questions about the meaning of life or why there is evil or what happens after we die?

Maybe "how can these things be?" also means "how can I have this rebirth of my spirit if I'm not in control of it?"

We think of Nicodemus as a "seeker" but I think it's pretty important to realize that what he's after isn't in the realm of theology or intellectual inquiry of any kind. He's concerned about his relationship with God, about the state of his soul, about the meaning and purpose of his life, about whether the things he's believed all his life are really true, about what it means for his life if Jesus really is from God. It's personal, and it's real.

At this point I sense Jesus moving closer to Nicodemus. He responds to the heart of Nicodemus' questions with the observation that essentially echoes Nicodemus' opening remark: God in love has reached out and sent Jesus himself – God's very presence - into the world. Those who perceive that presence (as Nicodemus has, already, it seems) have the new life of the spirit already begun in them. The spiritual journey becomes, not so much a quest to find God, but a movement into a perspective where we can see that the God we seek is already seeking *us*.

Even if you read on to the end of the chapter, you won't find out how the conversation ends. John doesn't tell us. We don't know a whole lot about how Nicodemus' spiritual journey unfolds from here. He appears twice more in John's gospel. In chapter 7 we find him with other religious leaders, arguing that they shouldn't dismiss Jesus without really hearing him. Near the end of John's story, we see Nicodemus again when he goes with Joseph of Arimathea to claim and bury Jesus' body after the crucifixion. It's a dark day but it isn't night. We see that he has become willing to be openly identified among Jesus' disciples. Unsurprisingly, though it's this nighttime conversation of a seeker with Jesus he is most remembered for.

John's inclusion of this conversation early in his gospel sets a tone that the church hasn't always been guided by.

There's an openness here that welcomes a seeker, that entertains questions ... and prompts those questions to unfold into more than mere intellectual exercises.

There's an openness here that makes space for – that listens to – those who just aren't sure yet. There's a tacit acknowledgement that faith is a journey, and an acceptance of where each seeker is on that journey.

The point is that the life of faith is not about getting all the right beliefs down pat or proving the existence of God or having answers to all the questions or doing certain things or not doing certain things or praying a particular prayer ... but rather about responsiveness to the Spirit of God. It's a shame that this text has been so much used to promote a narrow and formulaic notion of being Christian when its real intent is quite the opposite.

Just as Jesus meets Nicodemus in his nighttime seeking, with acceptance and understanding of his heart, he meets us as well. When we wonder what else we have to do to be "good enough" he assures us that we are already loved. When doubt and despair pull at us, he encourages us to trust the Spirit. When we struggle with all the stuff we don't understand, he reminds us that we are not God and God is in charge. When we don't know where the journey will take us next, he reminds us that he is our companion. When we feel lost, he lets us know that God hasn't lost us.

In the end our seeking leads us to the God who has always been seeking us, who knows us – all our ways, as the psalm says, who is light even in our darkest, most troubled nights, whose love is embodied in Jesus, who welcomes us wherever we are on our journey.

Amen.