

Am I A “Nicodemus”? — Rev. Denise Stone

Text: John 3:1-21

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Today is the First Sunday in Lent.

Lent is the period of 40 days which comes before Easter in the Christian calendar. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, Lent is a season of reflection and preparation before the celebrations of Easter. By observing the 40 days of Lent, Christians replicate Jesus Christ's sacrifice and withdrawal into the desert for 40 days. Lent is [often] marked by fasting, both from food and festivities.¹

Given the year that we have experienced, I think we have fasted from many things already. You might want to consider what you can add into your observance of Lent. Perhaps, it will be to spend a few more moments each day reading Scripture and praying or finding ways to share the love of Christ with those around you.

For today's Sermon, I would like for you to consider what we can learn from the Pharisee Nicodemus and whether we share any characteristics with him – good or not so good.

Which brings us to our Second Scripture Reading for today from the John, Chapter 3, verses 1-21:

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus 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.”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.⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’⁸ 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.”⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?¹¹ “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”ⁱⁱ

The Word of the Lord, **Thanks Be to God**

Our text, at least part of it, is probably very familiar to many Christians. We are all probably able to recite John 3:16,

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

This text, however, is about so much more than just this one verse, as important as it is to many of us in and for our faith.

As I said already, for today I want us to focus in on the person of Nicodemus and his actions.

What can we learn from him?

First, in the Gospel of John, the image of light and dark is very prominent. If you are a student of history you may already know that, unfortunately, many of our siblings of color have often received mistreatment and prejudice because of errant interpretations of this and similar texts.

Having now the knowledge that the light and dark passages are typically used by John as *metaphors* for good and bad, we should note that it *is* significant that this Pharisee and member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, Nicodemus, comes to Jesus at night.

What do we know about Nicodemus?

He only appears in the Gospel of John and as I just pointed out, he is identified as a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin.

This means he was one of the religious leaders of the Jews. This is the group that will eventually have Jesus arrested and crucified.

We do encounter Nicodemus two other times in the Gospel of John. Once, when he gives a very vague argument in support of Jesus before the Sanhedrin and then later, at the Cross, when he and Joseph of Arimathea bring burial spices to apply to Jesus' body before burial.

What we see in today's text is that Nicodemus is curious. He wants to know more about Jesus. While wanting to know more, however, Nicodemus also is mindful of his position and influence in Jewish society; he comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness rather than in the daylight.

This tells us that Nicodemus might be unsure about who Jesus is and/or possibly he is more afraid of losing his position and prestige than in following Jesus. We can only speculate as to his motives in this first encounter with Jesus.

Deborah J. Kapp, in her article on this passage suggests the following,

If any character from the Bible can be regarded as representative of twenty-first-century church members, it might be Nicodemus. In many ways he is a sympathetic character. A successful and self-confident man, he plays a leadership role in his community. He is spiritually open and curious, yet also rational. He approaches Jesus directly and tries to figure out Jesus' actions and social networks. He is committed and curious enough that he makes an appointment to talk with Jesus face to face. However, Nicodemus is not ready to go public with his interest in Jesus, so he makes the appointment in the middle of the night, when he can keep his faith secret, separated from the rest of his life. His imagination is

caught by Jesus, but he wants to compartmentalize whatever faith he has. Nicodemus is not yet ready to declare his faith in the light of day, not prepared to let it change his life.ⁱⁱⁱ

Many of us are not so different from Nicodemus.

We often like to compartmentalize our lives to make our work and home lives easier. We may choose to be careful with whom we share our religious beliefs or political leanings for fear of retribution or ridicule. We may reserve our faith for Sunday mornings and the occasional special service – if that.

It could be quite easy for us to criticize Nicodemus and his choices at this stage in the Gospel of John. However, I would ask you to look at this entire encounter. Nicodemus seems to be genuinely interested in learning more about Jesus. While he does not fully (or at all) grasp the significance of the words Jesus speaks, he still asks and continues trying to learn.

Look again at the end of verse 3 through 12.

...no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”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. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ 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." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

Jesus tells Nicodemus about being born from above, and yet Nicodemus misses that distinction and focuses on "birth" and re-entering a mother's womb. Jesus explains to Nicodemus that he, Jesus, is talking about how to gain the Kingdom of God.

Professor Osvaldo Vena explains that "Jesus is pointing at a spiritual dimension of life that has been completely missed by Nicodemus."^{iv}

How often are we missing the spiritual dimension that Jesus has for us? How often do we allow other priorities in our life obscure the priorities to which Jesus points us?

One of the caricatures of the Pharisees over the centuries is that they were more concerned with their 200+ rules to make sure they followed all of God's Commandments than they were in having a relationship with God.

That was probably true of some of the Pharisees, but I doubt all of them. Additionally, consider that the Pharisees genuinely thought that following all those rules were how they *showed* God that they followed him and loved him.

Jesus is pointing out to Nicodemus that there is more involved in the spiritual life than just following rules.

Jesus emphasizes this in the well-known verse 16.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

It is not following man-made rules that brings one to a relationship with God; it is in believing in Jesus that brings us into that relationship.

As I mentioned earlier, we encounter Nicodemus two other times in the Gospel of John. Once, when he gives a vague defense of Jesus before the Sanhedrin in John chapter 7 and then again at the Cross when he and Joseph of Arimathea bring burial spices to apply to Jesus' body before burial in John chapter 19.

What do these subsequent mentions of Nicodemus tell us?

First, that Nicodemus' coming to Jesus at night in Chapter 3 is the beginning of Nicodemus' journey with Jesus. Now he may have followed Jesus from a safe distance, but these other two accounts tell us that he did indeed follow Jesus, in some fashion.

It appears that Nicodemus' faith in Jesus grows as time passes. In John 7, Nicodemus is more seeming to explain the law regarding the plan to arrest Jesus, saying "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" He is still staying a safe distance from Jesus, but following, nonetheless.

It is with John 19 that we see Nicodemus' faith having grown to the point of not caring so much about what others think as he does in demonstrating his allegiance to Jesus by being one of the two to take Jesus from the cross, prepare his body for burial and placing him in the tomb.

We all start somewhere in our faith. When we first hear about Jesus, we may embrace him fully (to the degree we are able – especially if we are children at the time). We may be

skeptical. We may want more information. We may want to dismiss Jesus as a necessary part of our lives. We may want to claim Jesus but keep our faith private or hidden. We may fear what others will think.

Ultimately, Scripture (Matthew 25 for example) tells us that we will be called account for the lives we live on earth. This includes our relationship with God: creator, liberator and sustainer.

We who are gathered here today are all “a Nicodemus.” The question, is which one?

Are you at the beginning, curious but cautious?

Are you in the middle, growing but still unsure and afraid?

Are you much further along – willing to be known for your faith in Jesus Christ? Willing to show your faith in how you protect and defend the innocent or oppressed? Doing so despite the potential risks to your job, you family, or your reputation?

We don't know what ultimately happened to Nicodemus after the resurrection as he is never mentioned again in scripture.

I like to think that the tradition about Nicodemus is accurate:

According to tradition, some time later Nicodemus became a professed disciple of Jesus after the resurrection and was baptized by Peter and John.

Also, according to tradition, Nicodemus did suffer consequences for his decision to follow Jesus and did not have an easy, safe life afterwards.

Am I a Nicodemus? We all are at some level.

The question is where do you, where do we, fall along the Nicodemus-scale?

Let us pray.

Holy God,

Your ways are higher than our ways.

We pray for power and strength to surrender our fears, our uncertainties, our ways and follow your best way.

We trust You Lord.

In Jesus Christ Name we pray. Amen.^v

ⁱ https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/holydays/lent_1.shtml.

ⁱⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bartlett, David L.; Taylor, Barbara Brown; Long, Kimberly Bracken. Feasting on the Word Lenten Companion (p. 18). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-31-17-6>.

^v Adapted from a prayer found at: <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/prayer/prayers-to-strengthen-your-faith-in-good-or-hard-times.html>.