

In the Dark?

For the children:

Let's try something. I have something inside this box, and I want you to guess what it is. Before you guess, you can reach your hand in and feel it – but you can't take it out of the box.

Are you ready?

(I'll let each of them feel what is inside the box.)

Now that you have all felt it, what do you think it is? Is it a shoe? A toothbrush? What about a ball? Let's look and see. *(I have a peach in there.)*

Sometimes we think we know what something is, but we're not always right. In our scripture today, a man thinks he knows something, but it turns out he doesn't. And what he learns is that God loves him (Jn. 3:16). And God loves you, too.

Let's pray:

Dear Jesus, thank you for loving us. Help us celebrate your love for us every day – even when we don't fully understand it. Amen.

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom."

Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?" Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said, "How are these things possible?" "Jesus answered, "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things? I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Jn. 3:1-17 (C.E.B.)

For the adults:

I still remember the look on his face when the light bulb went off.

We were visiting our granddaughter and I had invited her 11-year-old son to sight read the script from Abbott and Costello's well-known "who's on first" routine. You all know that routine, right?

Xavier had never heard it before. I no longer remember which part he was reading, but suddenly he stopped reading and said, "O, I get it!"

Sometimes when we read John's gospel it's like that. We are reading along and we think we know what's going on when suddenly a light bulb goes off and we say, "O, I get it."

That's because, for John, water is never just water (Jn. 4:13). Birth is never just birth (Jn. 3:5). Breath is never just breath (Jn. 3:8). Bread is never just bread (Jn. 6:35). Eyesight is never just eyesight (Jn. 9:27). Light is never just light (Jn. 18). And darkness is never just darkness (Jn. 3:2).

Like Abbott and Costello referring to the first baseman, Who is never just a question, it's also a person.

Into that kind of a realm, we find Nicodemus – who unwittingly becomes the straight man for Jesus. He is confused by the words Jesus uses because they have more than one meaning. Nicodemus hears them literally when Jesus is speaking in metaphors and symbols. And he is understandably confused.

In some ways, it makes me feel sorry for Nicodemus. I mean, he seems to come to Jesus with a sincere desire to learn from him. In fact, he begins by offering an affirmation of the good things Jesus has been doing (Jn. 3:2). He doesn't even ask a question before Jesus offers a puzzling response (Jn. 3:3).

By the way, the next time we meet Nicodemus, he is defending Jesus when the Jewish leaders want to arrest him (Jn. 7:51). It's as if he has become a closet follower of Jesus. And then we read about Nicodemus again when he offers to help Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus, as if he has become a disciple (Jn. 19:39).

So, when you look at the whole story of Nicodemus, it feels like he is trying to be a follower of Jesus while maintaining his status as a respected – or respectable – spiritual leader.

Admittedly, Nicodemus comes at night, as if to suggest he is being duplicitous (Jn. 3:2). He doesn't want anyone else to know what he is doing. He doesn't want anyone else to see him there. Probably because he is trying to sit on the fence, keeping his feet in both worlds, to be a Pharisee and a Disciple at the same time.

In that sense, he is very different from the fisherman who leave everything behind to follow Jesus (Mk. 1:18). And Nicodemus is nothing like Matthew who finds a welcoming community when he stops collecting taxes to follow Jesus (Mt. 9:9).

It's as if Nicodemus is trying to keep his feet in both worlds by sitting on the fence. We all know people who like to keep their options open. They don't like to commit to something until they know the long-term consequences.

- In college, those people turn to a double major so they have a 'fall back' position in case they find they really don't like one field or the other – or there are no jobs available in one field or the other.
- At work, they might be overly concerned with building a resume on the off chance they find an offer for a better job.
- In personal relationships, they have many acquaintances and few friends; they are afraid to make a commitment of their emotional energy.

Those are the people who are more likely to suffer from a “mid-life crisis” when they realize some of the options they had been leaving open have closed. They become so invested in their careers or their hobbies that the cost to follow another path becomes too high.

The comfort of the current reality is enough reward to keep them from pursuing what might be a better future.

I have seen some of those tendencies in my life over the years, and I’m sure many of you have, too. The summer of 1987 is the most vivid in my memory. I was almost finished with my seminary education. I only had one more term before graduation, and like most students, I was looking for summer work.

As I began filling out job applications, I realized my seminary education was not very helpful in any field of work other than the church. At the same time, my college degree was no longer helpful because I didn’t have any experience in that field.

I learned that summer there was “no going back.” I could no longer allow myself to believe there were other options.

And while I can see why Nicodemus might be reluctant to give up his status as a respected Pharisee, I can also see why he might try to find a way to follow Jesus without giving that up.

He may have come to see Jesus at night to avoid any negative publicity, but he also knows there is little chance he will move off the fence and change. He is really too secure in his current circumstances, so we are not surprised when he tries to refute Jesus’ promises of a new life, a new birth (Jn. 3:4).

It makes it hard not to have pity for him.

But reading the story in such a literal fashion is falling into the same trap that Nicodemus falls into. When we read that Nicodemus comes at night and begin to think he does so to keep other people from seeing him, we are looking at the story the same way Nicodemus hears Jesus speaking. And like Nicodemus, we miss an important part of the story; we miss the power and potential for his life and for ours.

You see, Jesus makes him a straight man in a conversation intended for others. I know Jesus intended others to hear it because in the Greek, his answers are in the second person *plural* – or as southerners would say it, Jesus doesn’t say “you” to Nicodemus, he says “y’all” (Jn. 3:3, 5, 7 et al).

In other words, Nicodemus comes under the cover of darkness and Jesus speaks to the crowd who happens to be listening in on the conversation.

It becomes harder to keep his secret.

The fact that Jesus begins speaking to a crowd rather than to Nicodemus is a clue that something else is going on here. If Jesus is speaking to others, then Nicodemus hasn’t come at a time when others might not see him. There is something to be seen and heard ‘between the lines’ of the story that cannot be found in a literal reading of it.

So what if ..

- What if the darkness is really just another one of John’s intentionally symbolic words?
- What if the darkness is not about the hour of the day but the quality of time?

- What if John, the Gospel writer, is implying that Nicodemus doesn't fully understand yet, that he is in the dark?

This is one of many places where John, the Gospel writer, is intentionally using symbolic language to add richness to the story. To John, Jesus is always the light of the world, and “in him there is no darkness at all” (1 Jn. 1:5).

Nicodemus, on the other hand, is ‘in the dark’ about Jesus and can't see – or perhaps he has created his own darkness and refuses to see.

I think of Who's on First, again.

John, the narrator, tells us that Nicodemus “comes to Jesus at night” (Jn. 3:2). Perhaps we can take that literally, but we should definitely hear it metaphorically. The question that is not answered is whether or not he leaves in the dark.

Nicodemus enters this story sounding as if he understands who Jesus is. He says Jesus “is a teacher who has come from God” (Jn. 3:2). But as the conversation goes on, it becomes clear that he doesn't understand everything. In fact, he may misunderstand more than he understands.

It's like the children not knowing there was a peach in that box.

And it makes me wonder how many of us do the same thing. We think we know what's going on, so we don't hear the invitation to experience new life.

I know my experience as an interim pastor here at Hope has been a place where I have had to rethink and reimagine what it means to be a pastor. I thought I knew how to do this work. But this experience has broadened my understanding and allowed me to see a different aspect of that work.

And while much of what I have done looks no different than what I've done for the past 35 years, I am seeing new aspects that I didn't know were possible. Like Nicodemus, I thought I knew my role. I lived that role. And now am I seeing things in a new light.

Or maybe, like Nicodemus, we as a congregation thought we knew what it means to be a church. Hope Mennonite Church has been living out its faith for almost 40 years. But what if the pandemic created an opportunity to explore that anew? What if this interim time has been an invitation to reconsider what it means to be a church?

Could it be, that like Nicodemus we are being invited to live in a new way, in a new day?

There are some scholars who suggest Nicodemus did come in the night, perhaps shortly after sunset, at dusk, when there is still enough light to see. According to Jewish tradition, that would be the beginning of the day since a new day begins at sunset.¹ The next time we meet Nicodemus he appears in broad daylight. His final appearance in the story is just before sunset – at the end of the day.

What if John has used the metaphor of a single day in Nicodemus' life to offer us a model for our own journey to salvation?

- He comes thinking he knows who Jesus is, professing faith with his lips.

¹ Because the creation story repeats the refrain, “there was evening and morning” to denote the passing of a day (See Gen 1:5 for the first instance of the refrain), Jews celebrate the beginning of the day at sunset rather than midnight.

- He struggles with how to live faithfully throughout the middle of the day.
- And then at the end of the day he acts on his faith, professing with his hands and feet

Perhaps his story is meant as an invitation. An invitation to look at our own understanding of who Jesus is and who we are in relationship to him. Maybe this is an invitation to ask ourselves how and where and when we have stood in the dark and how we might live in the light of day.

If we arrived in the dark, how can we leave in the daylight?

Jesus suggests to Nicodemus that faith lived out requires a radical change in the way we live – like being born again (Jn. 3:3). But this radical change is not necessarily a ‘once and for all’ change. It is a constant process of being reborn, of growing in our faith, moving from darkness to light.

Moving from the place where we merely recite John 3:16 – to a place where we can say, “O, I get it!”

Jesus loves me. Jesus loves you. And because God loves us we don’t have to stay in the dark. We can have a rich and rewarding life – in the daylight.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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