

### “Nico-waivers”

When I was young, in the third grade or so, I learned a lesson that has stuck with me. That lesson was that asking questions can be dangerous. While we often say that there is no such thing as a stupid question, in practice many questions are treated as stupid either by an authority figure or by one's peers. In school, asking a question opened me up for ridicule, embarrassment, and shaming. I learned that the safest way to deal with questions was to ignore them, or, if they were really pressing to ask the teacher after class. If there was to be any shame at least it was not public.

Initially one might think Nicodemus is coming to Jesus at night for reasons similar to mine, but there is more going on for him. He has to deal with conflict among his peers who are already finding Jesus' behavior and teachings problematic. (The scene prior to this is Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, an act that was not popular with the religious establishment). Nicodemus's desire to learn from Jesus could put him in some difficult straits with his fellow religious leaders on the Sanhedrin, (a religious/legal body that adjudicated transgressions of the Torah and other religious laws and precepts). Nicodemus had likely studied and worked hard to gain a seat on this august body. He did not want to jeopardize his standing with them by seeking out Jesus in broad daylight.

Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus has two unique aspects to it. First, this scene is only recounted in the Gospel of John. Thus we do not have other versions with which to compare it and gain further knowledge of it. This is the story and we are stuck with it.

Second, this scene takes place at night. The only other situation where Jesus is portrayed encountering one or more persons at night is at the time of his arrest. Nighttime traditionally has the aura of things only partially seen or understood. The tricky light and shadows do not allow for a clear experience. Night is also the time of danger from those who would use the dark to conceal nefarious intentions.

Therefore this situation with Nicodemus is fraught from the beginning. Even moreso once Jesus begins to teach him about being born from above and the movement of the Spirit. Nicodemus seems not to understand Jesus' teaching. His ability to perceive Jesus' metaphors are confused like his vision is in the twilight shadows. Jesus finds Nicodemus' literalism disappointing and perhaps disturbing. As a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus should have more than a literalistic understanding of scripture and spiritual matters. He should be able to understand a metaphor and interpret it. However, in this situation he is either not able to do so or he is playing dumb in order to get Jesus to explain the concept further.

Whatever Nicodemus' motivation, it draws out of Jesus profound metaphors about new birth in God and the Spirit of God. We learn that there is an opportunity for spiritual rebirth that comes by water and the Spirit, what we call baptism. Where we are not only washed of our sins, but symbolically die in the water and come out a new spiritual person birthed by our mother the Holy Spirit.

We also learn that the Spirit moves like the wind. We do not know where it comes from or where it is going. We do not see the wind per se, but we see the results of it as it moves the leaves, bends trees, and stirs up the dust. Neither wind nor spirit are magic but they are mysterious in their movements and in the way they affect us.

We cannot thank Nicodemus enough for taking a chance on enquiring of Jesus. We cannot thank him enough for asking the hard or stupid questions. We cannot thank him enough for helping us on our spiritual journey by setting the example of an enquiring heart.

We also know that the curiosity that he exhibited in today's reading was not the end. Nicodemus shows up two more times in the Gospel of John. The next time he asks a question it is of the Sanhedrin's desire to arrest Jesus. His final time he is no longer asking questions, he is helping Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' body down from the cross and put it in the tomb. This is very public and daylight act of rebellion against the Sanhedrin, and all who questioned who Jesus was and the truth of his teachings. At that time Nicodemus seems to be embracing Jesus and his teaching.

While, I still have some work to do to get over my fear of asking questions, we have a model in Nicodemus who asked the hard or foolish questions out of a deep desire to know more about Jesus and his teaching. He wanted to enlighten his heart and move out of darkness.

May our Lenten journey also be one from darkness to light. May our willingness to approach Jesus go from secrecy of the night to public acts of love in the daylight. May we too find the deep meaning we are searching for in Jesus' teaching. Let us follow Nicodemus as we continue on our own journey toward God.