

Stepping Out in Faith sermon series
Nicodemus - John 3:1-17
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Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

In this sermon series, called “Stepping Out in Faith,” we’ve been looking at biblical characters who’ve gone against the grain, who’ve been courageous enough to speak up and speak out against the prevailing wisdom and powers-that-be in the world. It’s hard to be the dissenting voice, isn’t it? And yet, these people have shown us the power of faith to challenge the injustices and wrong-doings in our society. When things are happening that stifle the kingdom of God, a kingdom defined by justice and mercy, then it’s up to us as followers of Jesus to speak up.

But that’s risky, isn’t it? I remember once in my high school government class we were debating the merits of requirements for people to be allowed to vote. My classmates, almost all affluent white people, were saying that there should be a test put into place so that the people voting would be intelligent enough to know what they were doing. Our teacher said, “Interesting. Does anyone disagree with his viewpoint?” Crickets. No hands. And then, without knowing why, my hand started to go up, and said, “I think everyone who’s a citizen of this country should be allowed to vote.” Some of my friends smirked, but our teacher said, “That’s called democracy.” I still remember how scared I was and how my heart pounded when I hand went up.

Nicodemus was also willing to raise his hand against injustice, but not before some serious confusion. Our passage tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, one of the religious ruling groups of the day who was staunchly opposed to Jesus’ work and ministry. Not only was he a Pharisee, but he was also a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, the same council that would later falsely accuse Jesus and condemn him to die.

But don’t judge a priest by the color of his robes. Nicodemus was an upstanding Jew and loyal Pharisee, but something more was at work in him. He’s heard about everything that Jesus has done, but instead of being filled with anger and hatred, he’s filled with curiosity. He needed to know more than what he was hearing around the watering hole. He had to see for himself what Jesus was all about.

So Nicodemus the non-conforming Pharisee steals away at night to see Jesus. Night and darkness are symbolic in John’s gospel; they usually signify a type of spiritual blindness or a lack of understanding. And that’s just what Nicodemus exhibits in this nighttime meeting with Jesus. Nicodemus proves he’s in the dark about Jesus by complimenting him as a teacher who has come from God because of all the signs and miracles Jesus has worked.

Now, on the surface this isn’t a bad thing to say. Most people would be flattered by Nicodemus’ praise. But Jesus knows Nicodemus is only seeing a small sliver of Jesus’ ministry. So when Nicodemus heaps on the miracle-inspired praise, Jesus doesn’t blush or give an “Aw, shucks!” Instead, he challenges him: “No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above.” There’s a wordplay here in the original Greek that is hard to translate into English. The word Jesus uses here, *anōthen*, means both “born again” and “born from above.” So Jesus is telling Nicodemus that to truly see the kingdom of God he must be born again and born from above.

That statement makes Nicodemus' darkness grow stronger. You can almost see him tugging on his long gray beard and scratching his head, trying to figure out what in the world Jesus means. Born from above? Born again? How could that happen? That whole idea of being born again is one that gets tossed around with a lot of weight these days. Some people measure a person's faith by whether or not they've been "born again". I got a laugh out of the way comedian Dennis Miller responded to this. He said a man came up to him once, got right in his face, and asked, "Have you been born again?" Miller coolly looked the guy right in the eyes and said, "No, I got it right the first time."

Nobody gets it right the first time, but there is something a bit ludicrous about the idea that being born again is some magical elixir that makes you immune to sin the rest of your life. Each day requires us to be born again, to step out in our faith, to die to our old self and rise to our new one. The forgiveness so graciously offered each day to us by God is a new birth.

What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus must have sounded impossible. I don't think Nicodemus was playing dumb; he was, after all, a teacher of Israel. But there was nothing in the Jewish religion that compared to what Jesus was talking about. Nicodemus simply couldn't relate to Jesus' words. Nicodemus is thinking of only earthly things, while Jesus is talking to him about heavenly things. He wants to believe Jesus, he knows this kind of spiritual rebirth is necessary, but he doesn't see how it is possible. There wasn't room in his faith for the new thing Jesus was doing.

I think when it comes to faith, there's such a thing as being too smart, and I believe this was part of Nicodemus' trouble. It's certainly important to have an intellectual grasp on the basic tenets of Christian beliefs, but I also believe it's possible to overthink our faith. Nicodemus analyzes Jesus' words from a rational, logical standpoint and concludes that what Jesus is saying simply isn't within the realm of reality. But God is not limited to operating within that realm. Nicodemus was not allowing room in his understanding for the work of the Holy Spirit, which operates beyond the boundaries of human control. If we're not careful, a faith based solely on intellect will always find a way to rationalize the response, "But that's impossible!"

That lack of logical understanding is why Nicodemus is still not seeing the light, and it's one of the challenges of stepping out in faith. We may not see the whole path before us. We may only see the next step. And yet, in faith, when we take that step our understanding grows. Jesus provides further illumination. "OK, Nicodemus, it's like this. Remember the story about Moses and the serpent? The Israelites were wandering in the desert, and, as was their annoying habit, they spoke out against God. So God sent venomous snakes among them, and many were bitten and died. The people asked Moses to pray for relief, so God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole, and whoever looks at it shall live. Do you see now, Nicodemus? The snake was nailed to a piece of wood and lifted up in the desert in order to save lives. I must be nailed to a piece of wood and lifted up, so that everyone who looks at me shall live. Don't you see? For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. I'm here to save you

And somewhere in the midst of that statement, light broke into Nicodemus' darkness. How do I know? Because a little later, when the Pharisees are conniving and scheming to arrest Jesus, old Nicodemus stands up in the middle of the council and, in the midst of the anger and hatred and deception being spewed about, he raises his hand in

dissent, becomes an advocate for Jesus, and calls for justice. How do I know? Because a little later than that, in broad daylight, Nicodemus and a man named Joseph take Jesus' dead and broken body from the cross and prepare it for a proper burial. Because he was willing to step out in faith, he was born again.

When this passage started, Nicodemus assumed he could explain what Jesus does through his preconceived categories of what was and wasn't possible. He keeps using these categories as the criteria to determine whether what Jesus says is true or not, and Jesus keeps shattering those criteria. In the end, Jesus says, there is only one category, one criteria, for determining the answer to all our questions about God: God so loves this world. If that statement is true, than anything is possible.

It is that ultimate truth that makes sense of everything we think is impossible. Intellectual understanding is important, but that's not what drives you to the bedside of a dying person. Rational explanations can be helpful, but they don't spur you to stand up for someone being oppressed or demonized. We don't do those kinds of things out of knowledge or intellect; we do them out of love for each other as God's children. There is a limit to what we can know, and when life takes us beyond that limit, beyond what we can understand, we have this truth to hold onto: God so loves this world.

I don't know how you come to Jesus. Maybe it's in broad daylight, where everyone can see you for who you are and what you believe. Maybe you stand up in the face of corruption and betrayal and dishonesty and call for justice. Or maybe you come at night, in the shadows of darkness, an undercover believer. Doesn't matter, really. All that matters is that when you see this cross, you believe that God loved you so much, that He sent his one and only son to die for you, so that you could live forever in God's kingdom and so that you could work here on earth to make that kingdom available to everyone, especially those that others want to keep out.

For Nicodemus, when all was said and done, with all that had been answered and all that was left unanswered, with all that he understood and all that he was unable to understand, there was one thing he knew for certain: that God so loves this world. This whole world? Everybody? Even me? Even them? That's impossible! Yes, yes it is. But we worship an impossible God.