

Trinity Sunday Sermon, Year B 2024
“Thank you, Nicodemus!”
May 26, 2024
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John 3:1-17

I think Nicodemus has gotten a bum rap over the years. Just as with Doubting Thomas, we have attributed negative characteristics to Nicodemus: Characteristics which we, of course, don’t have in common with him. Or at least so we believe.

We look down at Thomas because he doubted his fellow disciples saying that the risen Jesus had appeared to them. Thomas relies, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” (John 20: 25b) Thomas wanted proof positive, not a secondhand report. We see his doubt as undermining his faith such that the expression Doubting Thomas has entered the lexicon to refer to anyone who doubts something told them. It’s a pejorative we apply to others. It’s not as if we have ever been like Thomas, having our own doubts about something like the resurrection. Right?

Similarly, we have looked down at Nicodemus, portraying him in a negative light, based on the encounter with Jesus we hear of this morning.

Nicodemus is described as a Pharisee and “a leader of the Jews.” The Pharisees were a Jewish sect devoted to the strict adherence of the Torah, the Jewish Law. In the Gospels they frequently dispute Jesus’ behaviors and teachings, especially when they believe he violates the Law. They are the story’s antagonists seeing Jesus as a threat to their authority. As a leader of the Jews Nicodemus is a member of the Sanhedrin, a council of seventy-one elders who acted like a Supreme Court for Jewish legal disputes.

Both characteristics place Nicodemus squarely within two groups who see Jesus as a growing threat to the stability of the religious institution they control. This is a critical lens through which we must understand his visit to Jesus.

Yet historically we have not done so.

Nicodemus has been belittled for coming to see Jesus at night - under the cloak of darkness – to discuss Jesus’s teachings. What is he embarrassed or afraid of, we think, that he needs the cover of night to prevent others from noticing his visit? After-all we are out in the open and upfront about our relationship with Jesus in all the various groups we are associated with, right?

Yet by visiting Jesus, Nicodemus places himself in a precarious position that could get him ostracized by his fellow Pharisees and the Sanhedrin. Going at night was risky enough, never mind in broad daylight.

We also question Nicodemus’s questioning of Jesus, thinking that he failed to get Jesus’ message, making him either obtuse or clueless. We think, how could he fail to understand such a straightforward message? After all it’s always perfectly clear to us what Jesus’ teachings mean, right?

Take when Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Perplexed, Nicodemus says to Jesus, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Here we fault him for being a literalist, failing to think metaphorically, poetically, unable to grasp the mystical message of God. We think, he’s a religious leader and scholar, he should have understood what Jesus meant, should have had better Biblical criticism techniques, and not been so confused . . . or literal.

All of which is to say we have given Nicodemus a bum rap.

Truthfully though, what we have done by our criticisms is transferred our own questions, our own frequent lack of understanding Jesus’ message, our failing to look beyond the

scripture literally, our fear of being seen as believing in Jesus a little too much . . . we have taken all that and we have placed it all on Nicodemus. We have made him our scapegoat.

The reasons for this are many, but I think we scapegoat Nicodemus primarily because we are embarrassed and believe there's shame involved when we fail to comprehend Jesus' message ourselves. That we somehow should be smarter about these things. We think that our doubts are bad and indicate a lack of faith in us. And all too often we believe – or think our friends, family, and co-workers believe - that being associated with Jesus is at best quaint, certainly archaic, and at worst, to be deluded.

We need to get over these beliefs because the truth is we are just like Nicodemus.

And that's okay!

Being able to identify with Nicodemus is a great gift he gives us. It's a great gift because it tells us that all these things – the concerns of what others may think about our faith, the questioning, the lack of understanding - are all part and parcel of a life of faith. Which means that they are okay.

So instead of belittling him, we should be thanking Nicodemus.

When I facilitate adult formation classes I start every class with this question:

There's no such thing as a foolish question, except one. Which one is the foolish question?

The one left un-asked, because it means you'll never get an answer. Asking questions is good! In fact, in our Church, it's expected, it's virtually Canon Law! Especially for we cerebral, knowledge seeking Episcopalians.

Nicodemus asked questions. He was curious. He knew Jesus was a wise person. He says to Jesus, "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." This scholar of Israel has acknowledged that Jesus has something to teach him. He isn't concerned about asking a foolish question because he wants to deepen his faith.

You know, people often think that the opposite of faith is doubt. But that wise woman and one of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott, says that the opposite of faith is certainty, not doubt.

Nicodemus understood that. He doubted the certainty his fellow Pharisees had about Jesus not being the Messiah, and of being a threat to them. His doubts drove him to visit Jesus so he could ascertain who Jesus was for himself. He may have over-stated that all the Sanhedrin or Pharisees thought Jesus was from God, *but he certainly did*. And that caused him to risk his visit.

His initial literal understanding of Jesus' words doesn't stop him from being open to a deeper, richer understanding of Jesus' message. In his perplexity at Jesus' reply to his question about being born again, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" In time Nicodemus *will learn* to not only understand earthly things, but heavenly ones as well. Which means he will see beyond the literal, and be open to God's deeper message in metaphor, poetry, and myth, all of which reveal the beauty and mystery of scripture. We know this is true by two more appearances he makes in John's Gospel.

In the first, Jesus is having greater and greater crowds' throng around him, thirsting for his message, believing he is the Messiah. The Pharisees are incensed and become angry when the Temple police don't arrest him. Nicodemus defends Jesus telling the Sanhedrin, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" (John 7:51) Nicodemus publicly defends Jesus. This is a risky declaration before those who deny Jesus. Nicodemus's faith in the heavenly things Jesus offers has deepened.

In the second appearance Nicodemus goes even further in showing his belief in Jesus. The scripture tells us that at the crucifixion he, along with Joseph of Arimathea, take Jesus' body from the cross and prepare it for burial, embalming it with 100 pounds of spices and then placing Jesus in the tomb. Another very public display of faith.

Both events inform us that Nicodemus is no longer afraid of what people will think of him, that his belief in Jesus has grown strong. He no longer desires or needs the cover of night. His faith in Jesus is out in the open.

So, Nicodemus, thank you. *Your questions*, allow us to feel safe about our own questions, so that we may learn and grow in faith. *Your doubts*, ease our own doubts, allowing us to see them as a part of our faith journey, not in opposition to it. *You moving* beyond Biblical literalism towards a richer and deeper understanding of God's word, growing to appreciate metaphor, poetry, and mystery help us to do the same. This last point is especially valuable to hold on to this Trinity Sunday when we, as our Collect states, "acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of [God's] divine Majesty to worship the Unity," one of the great and beautiful mysteries of our faith.

And most especially, thank you, Nicodemus for showing us that as your faith in Jesus grew, you found confidence to not be afraid of what others thought of you. That you were able to forgo the cloak of night, come out of the proverbial closet, and publicly acknowledge and proclaim the good news of Jesus as the Messiah, the One who God sent into the world to save it, because he loved us so much.

Amen.