

AMBIGUITY AND DISCIPLESHIP

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 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?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "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. "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.

(John 3:1-21, NRSV)

For as far back as I can remember, most of my deep, pivotal conversations have taken place at night. In high school, my friends and I would sit out in the car listening to the radio while pondering the meaning of life. In college, my friends and I would sit in the chapel courtyard at night staring at a lighted fountain wondering what we would do with our lives. My first two years in seminary, I lived in a dorm room with a window that opened on to the roof. At night my friends and I would slip out on the roof and stare at the stars while wrestling with the many ways our faith was being challenged and deepened.

What is it about late night conversations? Perhaps we're so busy during the day that we don't have time to move past the mundane. Perhaps at night, under the cover of darkness, we're willing to let our guard down and become more vulnerable. We're willing to share our secret fears, our hidden doubts, our brokenness in ways that the glare of daytime would only discourage.

One of the most important talks to take place in the Gospel of John happened under the cover of darkness as well. You could probably guess that Jesus was one half of the conversation, but the other half came from a most unlikely source, an important religious leader named Nicodemus. Nicodemus' position as a famous leader and teacher, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, prompted him to choose the cover of darkness during the night to talk to Jesus. Nicodemus would have lost major credibility with his peers as well as with the general public if he had been seen having a civil conversation with Jesus. Would-be messiahs like Jesus were a threat to the religious establishment that Nicodemus represented. If Nicodemus was spotted being too chummy with one of these upstarts it could undermine his own authority. Besides, if the people saw him conversing with Jesus, it might give them the idea that Jesus was worth listening to and then Nicodemus would really have big problems. He might end up actually influencing people toward following Jesus.

In addition to these practical reasons, it could be that Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus in the night because he was truly seeking spiritual enlightenment, and the darkness made his own spiritual searching more palatable. In reality we really don't know what led Nicodemus to that fateful conversation with Jesus. It is possible that even Nicodemus didn't know why he went. Maybe he just felt drawn. Maybe having heard all the stories about Jesus, he just had to find out the truth for himself.

Nicodemus begins the conversation by flattering Jesus. Nicodemus says, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him" (John 3:2). Was he trying to "make friends and influence people" or was he truly impressed by the things he had heard? Regardless of his motives, Nicodemus' kind conversation starter is totally ignored as Jesus cuts through the niceties and goes straight to the heart of the matter replying with the seeming nonsequitur, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, one cannot see the kingdom of God" (v. 3).

Nicodemus has been operating on a strictly material plane, not a spiritual one, so he altogether misses what Jesus is saying and replies, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born" (v. 4)? Since he was a Pharisee, we know that Nicodemus was an expert in the Jewish law. But from his question, we can see that he totally missed the spirit of the law and the Spirit of God that inspired the law.

Jesus responds to Nicodemus with a lengthy discourse repeating the need for the birth of his spiritual self. It actually sounds a little like the legalisms that Nicodemus found himself buried in already: that the individual bears the burden of bringing about this birth. However, right in the midst of this, Jesus makes one of the most wonderful analogies about God that we find in the New Testament. He says, "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit" (v. 8). In other words, we don't have God in a box. We don't understand everything God has done in the past, and we sure don't know what God will do in the future. And yet, like feeling the unseen

wind, we can perceive from time to time that God is active in our lives and that is enough. It has to be enough because that is what we get. That's why *faith* in our unseen God is the key. We walk by faith, not by sight. For someone like Nicodemus and sometimes for us as well, this proves mighty difficult. We hear his struggling in his skeptical response, "How can this be" (v. 9)?

By now Jesus must have furrowed his brow in his own disbelief as he says to Nicodemus, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this" (v. 10)? It's troubling to be sure, for Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee, but also a rabbi, and a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council. If anyone should have had spiritual insight or theological understanding it was Nicodemus. All of his book knowledge and religious training notwithstanding, Nicodemus' heart knowledge was severely lacking. And in the end it's the heart knowledge, it's the spiritual progress we've made in our love for God and our love for people that really matters. So Jesus tells Nicodemus very plainly why God sent him into the world in the first place. The high point of this conversation occurs in those famous verses from John 3:16 & 17 which say, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

Jesus wants Nicodemus to know that God's motivation is love, and that behind God's mysterious interaction with humanity abides an equally mysterious love. He wants Nicodemus to know that God's love for us serves as the driving force behind the relationship. That God isn't interested in condemning our imperfections, but instead wants to help us become truly alive. God's intent was, to use the words in John, to save us and give us eternal life. What exactly was God trying to save us from and for? I like the way the United Church of Christ statement of faith puts it: that God saves us from "aimlessness." God knows that if we have no higher purpose in our lives that we are doomed, doomed to feeling that life is futile, doomed to feeling cynical, doomed to wasting the precious gift of life that we have all been given. Through the life and teachings of Jesus, God seeks to save us from this aimlessness for eternal life.

When we think of eternal life, our minds automatically jump ahead to heaven. But eternal life is a quality of life that begins here and now. When we begin to view life from an eternal perspective, that is from God's perspective, all of a sudden our values and priorities shift. All of those things that seemed so important, the meeting we just couldn't miss, the project that just wouldn't wait, the ballgame we just had to watch, take a back seat to growing spiritually, practicing kindness, and nurturing relationships. When we look at our lives from God's perspectives, we realize that our greatest legacy is the number of people we have loved and helped. When we learn to live our lives in tune with God's Spirit, when our spiritual birth leads to spiritual growth and maturity we can begin to experience the promises of peace and joy right here on earth.

It may be that Nicodemus left that late night conversation just as much in the dark as when he began. It's hard to say for the ending of the story is ambiguous. However, we do have other clues found in other parts of the Bible. We know from reading further in

the Gospel of John that the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council of which Nicodemus was a member, was meeting in order to condemn Jesus. Nicodemus was the one who diffused their plot by pointing out that none of them had actually heard first hand what Jesus taught. He kept his own knowledge of Jesus quiet, protecting both Jesus and himself. The final appearance of Nicodemus occurs after Jesus has been crucified. Nicodemus, alongside Joseph of Arimathea used his influence to get the body of Jesus and put it in a proper tomb. They did this in secrecy for fear of the religious leaders (19:38-39).

How are we to gauge the effect of Jesus' late night conversation with Nicodemus? Had he become a faithful follower, a true disciple of Jesus, or was he still wading through the murky waters of doubt? Quite honestly we don't know. Although he spoke up on Jesus' behalf, he never mentioned any alliance with him. Even in secretly moving Jesus' body, he may have been acting out of respect more than devotion.

I like to believe that he allowed himself to believe what I think he was hoping all along, that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Messiah, and that following him was worth risking it all. But in the end we don't know. That's part of what makes Nicodemus so easy to relate to. Nicodemus' ambiguous faith in this mysterious God who blows into our lives in unpredictable ways and unexpected places is understandable. Wisdom tells us not to jump into something before gathering all the information. The difficult challenge of our faith is that we are asked to make a decision before all the facts are in. We are asked to calculate the odds and roll the dice in the middle of our own ambiguous lives where sometimes all we can see is the dark. That's not an easy thing to do.

However, I believe that if we choose not to bet our lives on God we take an even graver risk, for now we are betting that faith does not matter. And I for one believe that faith matters very much in the face of life's ambiguity. There is so much beauty and pain, good and evil, joy and sadness in our world that we need direction from someone beyond it all: someone who sees the big picture, and yet remains intimately involved with the smallest details of our lives; someone who guides us toward the good and comforts us through the bad; someone who gave us our earthly home and will someday welcome us to our heavenly home. In this ambiguous world of ours we need God. For like the unpredictable wind, whose source we do not see, whose power is beyond our control, and whose direction may catch us off guard, God will always be there. May we feel God's presence blowing through life's fiercest hurricanes as well as life's gentle summer breezes, through all our days and all our nights. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, amidst winter's cold we pause to think of your warm love. You loved us before we were aware you even existed. You love us on those days when we live as if you do not exist at all. Your love is the constant that permeates our lives and for this we are truly grateful. Help us to respond to the needs of others in ways that reflect your love.

Today we pause to remember people around the world including those who are still suffering from the earthquake in Turkey, the flooding in Indonesia, and the volcano in the Congo. We pray that you would motivate us to do all we can to help these and others who are in misery. We ask your sustaining presence for the family of journalist Daniel Pearl and other victims of hate and violence including the young people who were attacked in a nearby community. Help us and all people of goodwill to work against such senseless brutality.

We thank you for the beauty of your creation, the joy of friendship, and the hope we have through Jesus Christ. AMEN.