

“Nicodemus: Beginning to Believe”

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John 7:45-52

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We'll be with dear old Nicodemus for one more week after today. But first a word on what's coming up.

In two weeks we will celebrate World Communion Sunday, and with it, we'll be welcoming Dr. Darren Kennedy, one of our global mission partners and professor of theology at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, Egypt. That day we'll kick off a new series looking closely at our purpose, our mission as Christ's disciples, going through what's been identified as a decidedly missional letter of Paul, 2 Corinthians.

Today, if you've been with us, you'll know that we've taken a look at questions of faith, of doubt, of salvation and life through the particular lens of this man Nicodemus who features really just in one Gospel, John's Gospel, and even then mostly just in one conversation. As we saw last week, that conversation just kind of stops, and we have no idea what happens with Nicodemus.

That is, until this passage, when seemingly out of nowhere, Nicodemus comes back into the story, and things seem to be changing for him. Let's go to God's Word together, John 7:45-52.

Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and the Pharisees, who asked them, “Why didn't you bring him in?”

“No one ever spoke the way this man does,” the guards replied.

“You mean he has deceived you also?” the Pharisees retorted. “Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them.”

Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, “Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?”

They replied, “Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Gracious God, ultimately we are all works in progress when it comes to faith, when it comes to how your grace is at work within us. Be with us today, and for all our hesitations and our doubts, we pray for your faithfulness, and by your Word, bolster and encourage us whenever we might falter. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Who can say what Nicodemus must have been feeling at this point in the story? A whole swirl of things I would imagine. Hearing his fellow Pharisees lambast and dismiss this Jesus whom he had met with some time

earlier. They of course didn't know he had met with him, but something didn't sit right about the way they were talking about him.

So what would he say? Would he say anything at all?

Something I love about Nicodemus is that his story, or rather what we can tell from it, feels real, feels relatable to what our own stories, our own walks of faith might look like.

The dramatic notion of the about-face, 180 degree turn from sin and darkness and into the light, accepting Christ, all seemingly in an instant can be a powerful thing. I'm talking blinded by the light, stricken to the ground, Paul on the road to Damascus, you're going one way and then BOOM! You're going the other way. Maybe for some of you your story sounds like that.

But then for others, the story feels less sudden, more gradual, even imperceptible.

I believe that's something of what we see here with Nicodemus. See a good bit has happened since that time he came to Jesus by night. By one accounting, just using various time markers, this exchange took place something like a whole year and a half *after* Nicodemus had met with Jesus.

There's no reason to speculate that he had had some other kind of contact with Jesus directly, but certainly plenty of exposure to Christ's influence and his ministry. Jesus' ministry and notoriety had grown, and it's no stretch to assume that it wouldn't have been infrequent for him to pick up some tidbit of this miracle or teaching Jesus had done.

Even in the lead up to this very exchange among the Pharisees, Jesus had again caused quite a stir. See Jesus had come back to Jerusalem for yet another festival and back to the temple to teach. This all must have sounded very familiar to Nicodemus, as that's what had happened a year and a half earlier.

But this time, it was enough that the Pharisees and chief priests sent temple police to arrest him, but something stopped the police in their tracks, enough to make them disobey orders—and this is where we picked up today.

When the police came back, the Pharisees of course noticed they did not have Jesus with him, so they ask, "Why did you not arrest him?" And the temple police responded, "Never has anyone spoken like this!"

And now they're ticked. They sent them to do a job, and to their mind, these temple police got hoodwinked by this trickster, this fraud, this false prophet. "Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed," they say. You can just hear the contempt for Jesus, but even more for the crowd, for the temple police. These simpletons, these common folk, they'll just get suckered in for anything these days.

Ah, but "Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?" they say. Those who are enlightened, the truly devout, anyone with half a brain, really, surely wouldn't get caught up in all of this.

Then in the delicious bit of irony, one of their own is standing over on the side of the room, Nicodemus, trying to melt back into the walls.

You see, something's been at work within Nicodemus this whole time. Not in an instant, not some Road to Damascus thing, but something is different about it by this point, a year and a half after he had seen Jesus the last time.

Who can say exactly what's going on with him? All we can know for sure is that it isn't nothing. "Nothing" would have meant Nicodemus would've kept his mouth shut here. "Nothing" would've meant he'd simply left the Pharisees to their schemes and contempt, perhaps even join in. Maybe it was something about what he had heard Jesus was doing, the teaching, the healing. Maybe it was disgust at their behavior, the elitism, the religious snobbery. Maybe it was something to do with what Jesus shared with him at night those 18 months earlier. Maybe a bit of all of it. But something led him to open his mouth, here in the middle of this gathering, among his friends, among his colleagues.

"Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" That's what he says. That's all. On the surface, not exactly a full-throated testimony on the street corner, is it? This is no Martin Luther declaring, "Here I stand, I can do no other." But it ain't nothing, either.

It's an appeal to the Law, yes, an appeal to that which the Pharisees hold most highly in how they sought renewal in the Lord. It's a reminder, a gentle one perhaps, that all this scheming and contempt and jealousy he had witnessed among them was not the way of the Lord. But it was also something that, if it were followed, would give Jesus more time. He'd be given a hearing, a chance for his colleagues to be impacted the way he was.

Nicodemus is a bit double agent-y here, really. Spy vs spy stuff. That's a flawed metaphor, as Nicodemus isn't full on committed from what we can tell. But he's Severus Snape-y, from the Harry Potter series. Visibly on the side of the "opposition," but running interference. Still, only running interference in ways that wouldn't raise too any eyebrows, maintaining his cover. "The Law says, we should hear him out before judging him, right," he says.

In the end, it raises maybe a few eyebrows, at least for the moment. They question whether he's actually from Galilee, speaking up on this Jesus' behalf, but in the end it doesn't make a difference. The Pharisees are gonna Pharisee. What Nicodemus said didn't change much in the public trajectory of Jesus' faith and the Pharisees' reaction to him.

But it showed a lot of change for him.

Among the more powerful things to see from my perspective is the impact faith can have, the movement the Spirit can make, the hold Christ can have in someone's heart, especially when much of that happens out of sight.

That's encouraging if you're anyone, but I have to confess feeling especially encouraged from where I stand most weeks.

I remember two people from my last church in Germantown that were especially surprising. We'll call them Victor and Andy.

Victor had perhaps one of the best sermon scowls I've ever seen. I ended up getting to know him well, but when he first started coming to the church, he'd sit toward the back, arms crossed, and with this kind of look on his face. Now if you were to see that, what assumption would you make about his reception to the message being proclaimed that day? Yeah, that was mine too. I thought, "Well, maybe next time."

But then after the service, I was greeting folks at the door, and he comes up, again before I had gotten to know him, and I'm thinking, "Oh boy, what are we gonna hear now?" But instead he says, "That was so meaningful to me." I didn't let on at the time, but I was stunned. I think he just had a bad case of Resting Mean

Face. Y'all know what that is? It's when the neutral, normal way your face rests, just when you're holding it neutral, looks mean to folks who see it. So if you're ever just sitting somewhere, minding your business, and someone asks you, "Are you mad or something?" you may have Resting Mean Face. But Resting Mean Face or no, something was at work with Victor that no one, least of all me, was going to notice. I came to know him as a man of deep and thoughtful faith, but you wouldn't know it by the way he sat in church, because every Sunday, without fail, back there, arms crossed, scowl on his face. God was at work in him; you just wouldn't know it to look at him.

And then there was Andy. Andy was a youth who had grown up in the church, and while I was there I had seen him go through high school up until his senior year. And like we do, there was a Youth Sunday each year, on which some of the high school seniors offer some words. And I was surprised that Andy had opted to be one of those speakers one year. He was always a bit of the snarky sort, never take anything too seriously, didn't really speak up at things like Bible Studies, at least not in sincere ways, it was usually something cynical or sarcastic. I liked him a lot.

But when I heard that for Youth Sunday he was just going to wing it, as in, not write anything out, I thought, "Oh this could be bad." The vast majority of folks, unscripted, extemporaneous, can downright be a train wreck. So this is not a suggestion for others, youth or any age, to emulate. You just don't know what you're going to say when the adrenaline hits and the microphone's in front of you, so most of the time it's a long-winded, rambling mess. But it wasn't really my rodeo, so I didn't do anything.

Youth Sunday came. A couple of other seniors offered their words, and then Andy goes up. And true to his word, he wings it. No notes, nothing written out, and no evidence he had prepared much otherwise. There was a good bit of snark in there; he stayed in character for sure. But then along the way not only did he show some pretty impressive chops for public speaking but also some heartfelt testimony about his family, his faith, about forgiveness and the role God had played in his life.

And I'm sitting there thinking, "Where did *that* come from?" And I'm betting that no shortage of people there in the congregation, those who knew him, those who watched him grow up, that day were thinking, "So you *were* listening!" All those years, all that time, without letting on much at all along the way, Christ had been at work in this young man.

Whether you're Victor, or whether you're Andy, or whether you know a Victor or an Andy, whether you're Nicodemus, or whether you know a Nicodemus, be encouraged that there is not a moment when God is not at work within you, alongside you, through you. Be encouraged that this walk of faith, always a work in progress, doesn't always show up in the spotlight. How many of you right now can think of times in your life or in someone else's life in which you can see now how God was at work but at the time you had no idea? But every so often, sometimes rather unexpectedly, we find Christ on our lips or hear him on someone else's in ways that surprise even ourselves, that make us say, "Where did *that* come from?"

My challenge to you today is this: don't fight it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.