

John 3, 1-17. Jesus and Nicodemus by night. March 2020

Most of us have probably heard about how British Prince Harry and his American bride, Meghan, have stepped back from their official royal roles and how this has caused much consternation, confusion, and conflict as this couple attempt to start their lives anew in Canada without the pressures and demands of royalty. Although being a royal sounds intriguing and glamorous, it apparently in reality means doing a great deal of work, meeting ridiculously high expectations beyond your control, and enduring endless public scrutiny. In our current world, any public figure, not merely royalty, receives intense media attention, wanted or unwanted. Currently, our political candidates for the presidency are learning what it means to be publicly scrutinized to such a painful degree. Celebrities of any kind live in a fishbowl in our technologically adept society, and it's hard for them to do things privately, much *less* secretly or covertly. Now that wasn't quite so true for the setting of our Gospel lesson, was it? This lesson also involved two public figures, celebrities of a sort in 1st C. Palestine: Jesus, the young and radical preacher, just making a name for himself. And Nicodemus, the older, established pharisee and a leader among the Jews. They lived in a time without cell phones, without security cameras, without tracking devices, without facebook, and in that sense, they had more privacy than our current public figures. But even back then, their faces were known and their actions observed. Which is why when Nicodemus decided to seek out Jesus, he had to do it by night. He didn't want anyone to know he was doing it. And in 1st C. Palestine, which also lacked streetlights or building entrance flood lights, darkness made for a pretty effective cover. Such a simple strategy probably wouldn't work now, but it

did work then....Nicodemus' night time visit to Jesus was a secret known only to themselves, in spite of their public fame.

But why was that necessary? What was the big deal? The big deal was that Nicodemus shouldn't have *wanted* to meet and converse with Jesus. They are worlds apart in stature, status, and viewpoint. And here's why: Jesus, in this Gospel of John, is just getting started in chapter 3 here. But, prior to this, he's already been involved in two major public events, both of which created quite a stir. The first was that he attended a wedding back up north in his native area of Galilee. At this wedding in Cana, a village within Galilee, the bride and groom ran out of wine. Jesus, in response to his mother's nudge, turns water into wine---both to save the couple embarrassment, but also as a sign of God's kingdom. Because when Christ is present, water turns to wine. That's the kind of abundance of grace that characterizes our Lord. And that's the kind of miracle that gets talked about.

Jesus and his disciples then head south from Galilee and travel down to Jerusalem, the capitol city, in order to observe Passover at the Temple. But having arrived there, Jesus enters the courtyard of the Temple, which is filled with merchants hawking their sacrificial animals and other wares. Enraged at this desecration, he drives the animals out with a whip and over turns the tables of the money changers. That's the kind of rabble rousing that gets talked about.

And so here he is in chapter 3, as much gaining in *notoriety* as he is in fame, and the last person who should wish to meet with him is a man of Nicodemus' proud stature, position, and traditional views. Already the religious establishment is set against Jesus,

and maybe that's hardly surprising. As a leader of that establishment, Nicodemus should thoroughly disapprove of and distrust Jesus. So, why is Nicodemus seeking him out under cover of darkness? Obviously he feels ashamed of his yearning to connect with this radical teacher and preacher. Seeking some parallels, it's almost as if the Pope in the time of the Reformation learned that Luther was staying in Rome, and so secretly came to visit him by night to learn more about his protestant views. Or perhaps a bit like our democratic Governor, Tim Walz, secretly setting up a meeting with a young and republican mayor within the state who happens to be staying in St. Paul, in order to pick up some political tips. Very unlikely pairings! There are both political and religious aspects to what Nicodemus and Jesus do, so both comparisons are apt. In other words, this meeting shouldn't be happening. It must be done in stealth, as far as Nicodemus is concerned. If you ever snuck out of your house at night in order to meet up with someone of whom your family wouldn't have approved, you may have a little sense of how Nicodemus is feeling. With seemingly so much to lose in terms of face and public respect, Nicodemus must have been powerfully motivated to risk this encounter at all. Could it be that in spite of all of his success, prestige, and importance, Nicodemus secretly experienced a powerful need to make a change of some kind?

This internal recognition that we need to change is hardly unique to Nicodemus. It is present in all of us, in varying ways and to varying degrees, as we move through this journey we call life. Lent is particularly a church season that emphasizes change---the need for reflection, for repentance, for turning around, for change, for second chances. In some of the video games I used to play with my daughter years ago there was an option

called “second chance.” We’d be Nancy Drew, for example, the teen-aged girl detective. We’d fall down the hidden staircase and die, because we were supposed to first get a flashlight. But then the option would pop up on the screen: “second chance”. We’d get another shot at it. This time we’d get the flashlight, check the batteries and successfully make our way down the hidden staircase to unearth a crucial clue. Wouldn’t it be ever so wonderful if life came with a second chance option? If we’d get another shot at something? And maybe today’s gospel lesson suggests that it does and we do.

Let’s investigate the conversation that Jesus and Nicodemus have together. Like so many of the conversations recorded in John’s gospel, this one is rather cryptic. Nicodemus comes to speak to Jesus about faith and life issues, and the two of them have a rather headache-inducing exchange of words. Nicodemus begins with some affirmation for Jesus, telling him that he believes Jesus is a teacher from God, that the miracles Jesus is performing are evidence of that. Rather than responding like a self-effacing Minnesotan and saying, “Ah, it was nothing...”, Jesus instead utters words that appear to refer to that Second Chance option we spoke of earlier. He says, “No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.” Either because he’s a literalist or because he’s a bit of a smart acre, Nicodemus says, “Oh great, how’s that going to happen? In my old age, am I supposed to climb back into my even older mother’s womb and be born a second time around? Tell me something that makes sense, Jesus.” You’ll notice that the two men just don’t seem to be on the same page throughout their conversation, and one of my colleagues said that he attributes that to the fact that Jesus is speaking in poetry; Nicodemus wants the prose version. He wants just the facts.

Unfortunately, as Jesus points out to Nicodemus, it's often difficult to speak of heavenly truths without resorting to poetry and symbol. Jesus makes a reference to baptism and tells Nicodemus that no one sees the Kingdom of God without being born by water and the Spirit; *this* is the re-birth to which he's referring. He further specifies that the Spirit of God is free, like wind, and it blows where God wills it to blow, and that having re-birth in God is, likewise, a free and mysterious matter. He then speaks about God's love for the world. This chapter ends without any verbal response on the part of the Nicodemus, but I suspect he left Jesus with his head throbbing, and probably at least as confused as when he came. His rigid approach to life didn't easily lend itself to talk of re-births and second chances.

So, what about us and our approach to life? Does this word from God hit home for us this morning? Would you like to do some things differently? Or maybe undo some other things? Does a Second Chance sound appealing? If you could start anew, how might things be different? Would you spend more time having fun with your family and friends and less time at the office? Would you sing more and clean less? Would plant more seeds and fill out fewer forms? Would you stop smoking, deal with your drinking, make up with your estranged relation? What would your life look like if you had the opportunity for a new start?

Jesus makes reference to baptism as a kind of new start, a kind of re-birth. That's great, but most of us were baptized long ago. How's that going to help us today? The thing we may want to remember as Lutherans is that we have a *life-long* baptismal theology. That's one of the reasons that we have a Sunday each year where we renew our

baptisms, as we did back in January two months ago. It's not that we need to be re-baptized, it's that we renew our *understanding* of our baptism. We do that *annually*, but Martin Luther was a great fan of *daily* renewing one's baptism--of daily repenting of sin, rejoicing in God's claim on our lives, and then going on to live another day. Given the association of baptism with water, a most natural time for many of us to emulate Martin and renew our baptism would be in our morning shower. But, we also live next to 10% of the world's fresh water supply, so you might also renew your baptism when you walk along the Lake--or when you feel snow on your face or when you relax in a hot tub.

Water enters our days in a variety of life-giving and beautiful ways, giving us numerous opportunities to reflect on renewal. It's a new day; you're a claimed, forgiven, renewed child of God; once again, you have a Second Chance option for how you will live your life, starting right now. Which presents us with the good news from God for us this morning: *We get second chances*. We can start anew. Re-birth is a possibility. At any age and under any circumstances. In the realm of God's grace, which is the place where we live, *people get second chances*. They get to start over. We have seen this again and again in the stories of Scripture. Including the lesson from Genesis this morning, where Abram and Sarah are about to journey to a new land, in response to God's call, and start over. God's children do get second chances. They are called to new adventures and unexpected journeys. Even well-established people like Nicodemus. Even older people like Abraham and Sarah. Maybe even us.

Returning to our Gospel text, Nicodemus was in the market for a second chance. And Nicodemus showed some courage and initiative in coming to Christ, even if

he did so secretly. I think he must have shown that same courage and initiative in reflecting upon this conversation once he left Jesus that night with his head throbbing. The reason I think this is that 16 chapters later in John's Gospel, it is this same Nicodemus who, along with Joseph of Arimathea, will risk reputation and livelihood to request Christ's body after the crucifixion and place it in the garden tomb. So, something has happened to Nicodemus in those intervening 16 chapters. He has gone from being a fearful seeker in the dark to a courageous and compassionate believer who could take action by daylight. Took some time. Must have been a process. But he has grown into faith. And he has the privilege of caring for the crucified Christ's body and laying it in the tomb, from which he will rise. What kind of an incredible journey of faith was that? Did he make use of some second chances or what? Because he willing to embrace a new direction and experience re-birth, Nicodemus played his significant role in God's work among humanity.

This season of Lent it is especially appropriate for us to reflect on our need for change, for repentance, for rebirth. Maybe God is calling you to a second chance of some kind, to journey in a different direction, to experience re-birth in some way. Are there things within you or about you that need to change? Does God call you to a new journey, a new adventure? Is God's Spirit blowing your way in a fresh wind---forgiving your sins, freeing you from burdens of your past, giving you a new vision of what lies ahead? Age and circumstance are no barrier to the grace of God, nor is what lies in the past or our present. The power of the cross always stands as proof of God's willingness to gift us with second chances. Amen.

