

“Night Shift”

In today’s Gospel reading we hear about one of the most famous encounters in the gospels with possibly the most famous of all Gospel verses. It is a powerful passage because of the people involved, that is Jesus and a leader of the Jews. The leader Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night to learn more about who he is. They have a discourse that proves almost impenetrable to Nicodemus, and actually can be quite confusing to readers as Jesus talks about the wind, being reborn from above, and the Son of Man being lifted up like a serpent in the desert. It can be heady stuff for those with resources, much less a man conversing in the dark.

The chapter begins rather like a folk tale or parable, “There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.” That is about as benign a beginning as one can have; although it does tell us a lot. First that the man is a Pharisee which was a Jewish sect that was focused on a stringent interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures, particularly the 613 commandments given in the Torah. Jesus often teaches that we are to live by the spirit of the law instead of the strictest letter of the law. That often puts Jesus and his followers at odds with the Pharisees.

Next, in addition to learning this man’s name, we learn he is “a leader of the Jews.” Later in John’s Gospel we will find out that Nicodemus is a member of the Sanhedrin;¹ a Jewish ruling counsel under the Roman occupation. At that time, he will remind other Pharisees on the Sanhedrin who are opposed to Jesus that they must allow an accused man to speak for himself before passing judgement.²

Interestingly Nicodemus may also be a rabbi. I say this because Jesus calls him “a teacher of Israel.” The Hebrew word for teacher is “rabbi.” In contrast, Nicodemus is a Greek name. One would think that a person so deeply involved with Judaism would have a Hebrew or Aramaic name. Although, this could be that, like Jesus, his Hebrew name has been translated into Greek during the writing of the Gospel. Regardless of its origin his name means “the people’s victory.” A rather suggestive name given his place in scripture.

The traditional interpretation of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night is that he does not want to be seen. His colleagues in the Sanhedrin would question his coming to see Jesus and wonder if he had been fooled as they have accused the common people of being fooled by Jesus’s teaching, or perhaps that he is a believer in Jesus. However, I think there is another possibility.

Did you ever go to a friend’s house for a sleepover and end up talking way into the night with the lights out? Or perhaps you had a roommate in college and after turning out the lights for the night you continued to talk in the dark? There seems to be something freeing about talking in the dark. We cannot see the face of the other so there was some sense of anonymity. Or maybe since we cannot see the other’s face we don’t risk seeing a disapproving expression when we say something odd. When we are almost asleep our mind can wander and free associate. Talking in the dark can be special.

In the case of Nicodemus, I wonder that if instead of being afraid of what his fellow Pharisees might say about him visiting Jesus, it was actually that Nicodemus felt safer approaching Jesus in darkness. Perhaps he felt safer when he could not be

¹ John 7:50-51

² The other time Nicodemus shows up in scripture is after the crucifixion of Jesus. He assists with the Deposition of Christ and along with Joseph of Arimathea bring spices for the preparation of Jesus’ body for burial in the tomb. John 19:38-42

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completely seen. Jesus does confuse him when he talks about being born a second time from above instead of born by water and the Spirit instead of a mother's womb, the wind going where it will, and the Son of Man being lifted up like a serpent. Nicodemus may find Jesus' teaching compelling, but it is also confusing to him. If he comes at night, he hopes he won't look the fool when he questions Jesus about his teaching.

Nicodemus could be an example for how we can approach Jesus when we feel confused, concerned or anxious. Instead of feeling that we must have it all figured out, we can approach Jesus in the dark of our mind or in the dark of our room much as we would that old roommate or friend whom we spoke to in the dark. We can invite Jesus into conversation as we would a friend. Allow the darkness of the room help us feel safe. As we talk, we also make time to listen. When we hear something confusing ask the seemingly stupid question and patiently wait for the answer.

The truth is that we do not have to have it all figured out, Nicodemus a Pharisee, rabbi, and leader of the Jews did not. But he was willing to ask the questions, admit he did not understand, and humble himself as he waited for the answers. At one time he was unsure but he eventually would become a defender of Jesus and would come into the light to help take Jesus' body down from the cross and assist Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus. We do not know what he understood about Jesus, but we know he no longer needed the cover of night to be with him.

Perhaps we will always need the cover of night as we pray our prayers by our beds. Perhaps we too will be able to come with our doubts and confusion into the light. Whatever we do we know that we have Nicodemus to model ourselves on who was another of God's long line of broken, anxious, confused, and hurting people whose faith shines light into the darkness of the world.