

LENT: A Time to Fill Your Cup

Part 2: Journey from Darkness to Light

John 3:1-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Nicodemus doesn't get as much credit as he should as role model for us, and others, on the journey of faith – a journey from darkness to light. Perhaps that's because Nicodemus is a Pharisee, the sect within Judaism that held to a strict observance of the written laws of Moses found in the Torah, the first five books of our Old Testament.

Sometimes known for their sense of spiritual arrogance and moral superiority, **Pharisees, nonetheless, represent the very essence of religious tradition and orthodoxy itself. They were the role models for living a faithful and dedicated religious life.** Think of those in our day and age who fashion themselves as representing the very essence of traditional Christianity with its orthodox beliefs. Nicodemus deserves credit, therefore, for his questioning curiosity and courage to seek out this new teacher and preacher he's heard good things about, named Jesus.

Nicodemus had the necessary humility, and this is key, to be willing to hear and learn new things. Perhaps this was a result of recognizing that something was missing in his spiritual life, that his own cup was not overflowing and needed to be filled. Perhaps you and I have also recognized something is missing in our spiritual life – our connection with God – and that our own cups are not overflowing and need to be filled. Jill Duffield, writing a commentary for this biblical passage in the *Presbyterian Outlook*, suggests the following.

I wonder if we need to take on the posture of Nicodemus this Lenten season. I wonder if we need to go from what we know in order to see the new thing that God will show.

I wonder if we shouldn't go looking for those who might not pat us on the back and tell us we're great, but instead will point out to us where we have missed the mark and failed to see the evidence of the Holy Spirit's working.

Few things are more frightening. Few things are more faithful. But if this leader of the Jews, this learned Pharisee, can do it, maybe we can, too.

It's no accident that the author of the Gospel of John sets the scene for the clandestine meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus under the cover of darkness. Darkness, in this gospel, has deep theological meaning. **Darkness is the spiritual state of not yet understanding or accepting that Jesus represents the kingdom or realm of God in our midst.** Understanding and accepting that God is in our midst, as represented in

and through the life and ministry of Jesus, defines **the journey from darkness to light**. This is reflected in the story by Nicodemus' misunderstanding that to be born again isn't a physical thing, but a matter of being spiritually born from above, or born anew, or born of God.

Why from above? In the ancient gospel writer's worldview, God is above us. Since he believes Jesus is God in the flesh come down to earth, Jesus, therefore, had to come "from above." Another way to say this is that **Jesus came from God's realm, and inaugurated that realm among us in the here and now**. That means we can experience eternal life now. Jesus tells us, then, that we can't fully participate in the kingdom of God unless we are born from "above," from the realm of God.

Being born anew, as in recognizing that we too are from the realm of God, is a spiritual experience available to all, but perhaps most needed by religious people who might think they do not need such a transformation of heart and mind (i.e. those who are legalistic like the Pharisees and believe they have nothing else to learn).

If you find yourself among those who are uncomfortable, as I am, with the evangelical notion of being "born again Christians," then **what does this text mean in our progressive tradition? Well, as you might imagine, it has less to do with what you believe, and more to do with putting Jesus' teaching into action**. We find some help in 1 Peter 1:22-23. It puts three elements – truth, genuine mutual love and being born anew – side by side. It states:

Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

Reminds me of the song, "And they'll know we are Christians by our love." **It is the love of God, self, and others that reflects our being born again, born anew, born from above, born of God**. And remember, in this gospel story it all begins with Nicodemus cultivating the humility of a learner. **Part of filling our cup, then, involves each one of us cultivating the humility to be a learner. This is necessary in our journey from darkness to light**. Many of us here this morning, for instance, have felt transformed in our journey of faith as we have looked beyond the traditional ways of understanding scripture and ancient church doctrine and dogma. We should have no problem, therefore, with declaring our own sense of being born again, born anew, born from the realm of God.

I suppose I should mention at this point something about a little verse tucked into this story. Perhaps you've heard of John 3:16. Why don't you say it along with me, in the King James English, of course.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (KJV)

For many, this one verse of scripture summarizes the entire gospel message in a nutshell. (Personally, I'd say Matthew 25 fills that roll, where Jesus states that when we do anything for the least of these we do it for him). But for others, John 3:16 functions as a theological reflection upon the meaning of God, through Christ, coming into the world.

When it comes to interpreting this verse, however, first and foremost **it is about God's action, not ours. It is primarily about God's grace.** By virtue of loving the entire world, God sent us One who would reveal just how much we are loved by God. It is the recognition of that love that transforms lives. It's what allows us, to quote Bishop John Shelby Spong, to live life fully. And it reminds us that **the imagery of eternal life in the Gospel of John is as much or more about the 'here' as it is about the 'hereafter'.**

Salvation, when understood this way, is not an intellectual, or even emotional acceptance of doctrinal statements that theologians (including the gospel writers) believed about God and Jesus. For we are told in verse 17 that God sent the One named Jesus not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him. It's crucial to notice **that it is the world that God so loves.** As one biblical commentator states,

It was not a particular nation or a certain people; it was not just the good people; it was not only the people who loved God; it was the world.

That includes the person who loves God and the person who never thinks of God, the person who finds rest in the love of God and the person who turns away from the love of God - all are included in this vast inclusive love, the love of God.

God doesn't pick and choose who to love. Everyone is loved, and loved equally and unconditionally by God. This, in part, is what Jesus came to reveal. Again, realizing this has the power to transform lives. Realizing this has the power to help fill our cup. For in this story, the message that cries out is one of acceptance: God's acceptance of us – of you and me. This message is so important that it lies at the heart of the second bullet point of our congregation's Mission Statement: "Receive and openly share the love of God."

There are many people in our society today, perhaps even yourself at times, for which self-acceptance may be one of life's biggest struggles. At the heart of the gospel, however, is God's acceptance of us. The gospel writer's point in this story is that **God's acceptance of us should and must have an impact on how we view ourselves and our own identity, and then how we act, how we relate to God and each other, and how we view the world.**

Our world, our very selves, cannot remain the same when we realize that we are loved with a love that will not let us go. Our journey, then, is indeed similar to Nicodemus' in that it is one from darkness to light...more light.

Amen.

Resources:

"2nd Sunday in Lent – Looking into the lectionary with Jill Duffield," *Presbyterian Outlook*, 2017.
Feasting on the Word