

REFLECTION 5TH MARCH 2023

NICODEMUS JOHN 3:1-17

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Have you ever asked yourself how does one come to have faith?

How did you come to faith? Some of us have inherited our faith from our parents, they baptized or christened us as babies, and we have continued to practice our faith which our parents initiated. Some of us went to Easter camp as teenagers or a church camp or crusade and came to faith when an altar call invited us to come forward and say the sinner's prayer and invite Jesus into our lives. Some of us came to faith because we had a very frightening life-threatening experience, and we discovered God in the midst of our crisis. Some of us avoided God for as long as we could, running, hiding, and trying to escape from the any commitment to this crazy thing that people go to and believe in. Somewhere in all these experiences you and I have picked ourselves up from what we were doing this morning, had our breakfast, got dressed and come to this place that we call church. Most of us come expecting something, hoping to fellowship and find something good to help us begin our new week.

But the question exists, how does one grow and mature in one's experience of God?

Nicodemus comes to Jesus as one whose experience of God has been nurtured and supported by a community of believers. John begins his story by identifying Nicodemus a Pharisee as a leader of the Jews.

One of the unfortunate consequences of reading John 3:16 literally has been an excessive, almost exclusive focus on individual salvation. The central question becomes am I saved? Have I experienced personal salvation? Do I know Jesus as my Lord and Savior?

One of the most confusing times of my Sunday school years was when we got a student from Lincoln Bible College, I still remember her name Ruth. She asked us 8-year-olds whether we were Christians? I remember sitting there and thinking what a stupid question. I looked at her and was a little stunned by her question in the first place and I remember saying to her enthusiastically yes. I was proud to answer her question positively. And she responded equally enthusiastically, wonderful, when did you become a Christian? I was confused I looked at her like she was really thick, and I said, when I was born. Well you can imagine what happened next! She said, "oh no Fei, that doesn't make you a Christian you have to have asked Jesus into your life as your personal savior". Oh, for crying out loud, can you imagine me saying to our kids here at Rainbow room that they are not Christian because they haven't made a

personal commitment to Jesus Christ? What would that do to you as parents (ask whoever might be there) would you bring your children back to church if I excluded them?

I remember feeling hurt and embarrassed that I got the answer wrong and that somehow, I didn't fit in, I wasn't a Christian because I hadn't done or said the things I should have done to be accepted. I remember not going to Sunday school the next week because I was a little bit scared, I wasn't allowed. Then I remember there was a birthday party the following Sunday so on Saturday night I prayed, and I said. Dear God, Jesus, apparently, I'm supposed to ask you into my life so come in. Amen. I went to Sunday school, and I said to my teacher, I'm a Christian and she said wonderful when did this happen and I said I asked Jesus into my life last night. And that was the end of that.

We have before us this morning what I would consider one of the most misused, misunderstood texts in the entire Scripture. One single verse has provided motivation for some of the most destructive and unchristian impulses of those who take the name Christian. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

Taken literally it suggests that those who do not believe in this son will perish. It is difficult to overestimate the harm, hurt and

abuse that has been encouraged by this literal rendering of John's Gospel.

If our interest is in deepening our walk with God rather than creating belief systems of exclusion, then this passage from John, including John 3:16 has much to teach us. The irony is that of the four Gospel writers John was the least literal among them. All of the Gospel writers take great liberty with the actual events of Jesus life and the things he said.

It is particularly ironic that in today's Gospel John's Jesus rejects the very literalism that has so often dominated the reading of this text. When Jesus offers the metaphor of birth to speak about spiritual growth, Nicodemus taking a literal approach to Jesus words says, "how can one be born a second time from your mother's womb?" John tells us Jesus was amazed at Nicodemus' literal understanding of this evocative image and says to Nicodemus, "You are a teacher of faith and yet you are unable to understand what I am saying?" Jesus would be equally amazed at how his invitation to deepen our encounter with God through a rebirth of the Spirit is still used today as a literal basis for exclusion, rejection, dominance, and judgment. If the life and example of Jesus gives us reason at all to be literal in our reading of Jesus words it would not be John 3:16, but rather John 3:17 "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

For people like Nicodemus and many of us our faith was formed from our birth by our parents and their faith commitment and community. For Nicodemus his faith was formed by the Hebrew Scriptures, the role of a community of believers was primary in his faith development. In the Hebrew Scriptures the shaping of a loving and just community is God's central concern. As a child Nicodemus was taught the traditions of this faith. As a youth Nicodemus was nurtured in the collective wisdom and experience of a community who had long sought to know God. As an adult, Nicodemus was sustained by a community who encounters God at the heart of creation, in Exodus movements of liberation, in prophetic calls for justice.

John in his Gospel reminds us of Nicodemus place in a community of faith because John, like Jesus, considers the role of a faith community central in our own faith formation. The songs and hymns we sing together on Sunday morning, the prayers we offer, the support we give and receive, the study and reflection, the coffee, all reflect the important role a community of believer's plays in our spiritual formation. When we absent ourselves from a community of faith, we are cutting ourselves off from one of God's primary tools for inviting us into a deeper and more intimate encounter with God.

Service, caring for and about others, is the second formative influence on faith and our encounter with God revealed in this

passage from John. Nicodemus is quite clear the reason he comes knocking on Jesus' door at night is that through Jesus' healing of the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for those in need, they have experienced the presence of God. "No one can do the things you do apart from the presence of God," says Nicodemus. When we participate in fellowship here and in our community, there is more at stake than the good we might accomplish. For Nicodemus it was the acts of caring and compassion of Jesus, which further opened his heart to God's presence.

So, what does this mean then for our own faith journeys? Are we open to the guiding of God's Spirit. The question faced by Nicodemus and anyone seeking to grow in faith is, are you willing to let go of your certainties about who God is? Are you willing to experience God in new ways? Are you ready like Abraham and Sarah to step out on a journey with God without the comfort of knowing exactly where it will lead you? Although Nicodemus came knocking on Jesus' door, what he ultimately discovers is that Jesus is knocking his door. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus; and we also are invited to let the Spirit of God be our guide, to be born anew. Are we as a community; are we as individuals prepared to trust God enough to live without absolute certainty about whom God is? An encounter with Jesus is an invitation to grow in faith through the guidance of the Spirit.

Rather than creating a belief system that saves some and rejects others, John is simply expressing the depth of God's love, which can be encountered in the presence of Jesus. How do we grow in faith, how do we grow in our encounter with this God who so loved the world?

I don't know about you, but it has been my experience that my faith is strongest, I feel most close to God when I participate in community, when I care about others, and when I let go of my certainties and remain open to the guiding of God's Spirit. Amen.