

A Sermon for DaySpring
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Faith's Therefore
John 3
March 5, 2023

In the third chapter of John, we meet someone who will show up twice more in John's gospel as someone who appears to be drawn to Jesus but can't quite bring himself to come out of the shadows of reservation into the light of conversion. He represents many people who can't quite get over the hump, can't quite give themselves to Christ, but they can't walk away either. No matter what questions they have, no matter how frustrated they get with Jesus' followers, no matter what doubts they harbor, there's still something about Jesus they can't just walk away from. It's like he's calling them, beckoning them to come. And they want to go but just can't quite . . . yet.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. John's description of Nicodemus not only includes his name which is somewhat unusual, but goes step by step to build the recognition. This is a man of prominence, a leader, respected, perhaps feared, but one who, while a leader of people, is also bound by their allegiance to watch what he says and does. So he comes at night. He comes at night to avoid being seen by others in order to have a private conversation with Jesus.

But John always means something even more than the literal time of day when he talks about night or darkness or blindness and their counterparts day, light, and sight. For John these are theological signifiers of faith. The gospel opens, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." The rest of the gospel is exploring how this grace comes into a world in need of it. Nicodemus, coming in the night, is someone coming, still searching for the light of faith.

He has come with something to say, and he opens the conversation, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." You can read what happens next as if Jesus interrupted him with his response. Like the interrupting cow:

Knock Knock. Who's there. Interrupting Cow. Interrupting cow . . . Moo!

Or we can remember it in biblical terms as well. Like the father in Luke 15 interrupting his prodigal son returning home in shame. He starts his speech to his father, "I know I have done terrible things..." His father just interrupts him, "No-you're my child. Welcome home." We can think of this like Moses in Exodus 3. Where Moses has all of his protests against God's call of him: "You know that I can't speak; you know I'm a stutterer," and God says "no, I've called you. Trust me."

In both of those biblical stories and the interrupting cow, there's this interruption in the story, and the dialogue continues on as if there's not a missed beat. I want you to pay attention to that because this is one way of reading the story. I think religious leaders like Nicodemus would thrive in that kind of tete-a-tete, rat-a-tat, give and take, point and counterpoint, drawing the swords of wit to mutually sharpen one another's wisdom. The Pharisees, like Nicodemus, were pretty constant opponents of Jesus. So you can read the whole story this way and see how Jesus challenges the limits of Nicodemus' understanding with mysteries, wrapped in riddles, wrapped in signs and wonders.

But there's another way to read this story in which Jesus *doesn't* interrupt; he doesn't draw his intellectual sword for a battle of wits. His sword stays sheathed. In its place, rather, just silence. Perhaps unnerving silence. I can imagine long periods of silence in the conversation. This is not a meeting of minds. This is a meeting of hearts. This is not intellectual banter. This is a soul matter in which the heart of one man hangs in the balance.

"Rabbi," the leader of the Pharisees begins, "we know you are a teacher come from God." It is a remarkable confession, up to a point. "No one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Then silence.

Jesus doesn't interrupt. Jesus listens. He waits. What's he waiting for? He's waiting for the rest of the sentence. But Nicodemus has stopped. He has stopped short in front of the one word that will change everything, that will mean everything. The one word that he doesn't say: "Therefore". I know you are from God, therefore . . .

But the "therefore" doesn't come, not yet. He wasn't ready yet, and this "therefore," uttered or withheld, is the difference between admiring Jesus and following him. Nicodemus represents every place in our lives where we confess something meaningful in our faith, but can't quite yet draw our confession to its implication for our lives. This is a picture of someone coming to faith in Christ for the first time; it is also a picture of the challenges of the ongoing conversions of every part of our lives to the way of Christ.

The work of transformation isn't done the moment we begin. The rest of our lives is the 'therefore' challenge. Sometimes it feels like the risk is too high, the reward too small, the uncertainties too great, the doubts too severe, and all of that has to do with our confession. But when it comes to our therefore, it's what turns faith into trust, and where we take the conviction of our lips to the response of our hearts. It's where hearers and speakers become doers. It's where faith comes to life. Where we step into the daylight of the gospel and leave nothing undared. It's when the rubber of faith meets the road of reality: therefore.

The most famous 'therefore' in history belonged not to faith but to high anxiety. Rene Descartes sat down at his desk with high anxiety, trying to settle on what he could say that was definitely true. He thought and thought about this question. Everything he thought about that seemed true he could also tear down just as easily. Sounds like a fun evening alone right, sorting through intellectual and existential angst. I can believe that the shoes on my feet are real, right?

Well, what if . . . here he would go . . . what if I'm delusional and only think those are shoes on my feet, but actually I'm barefoot. I wouldn't believe it if my doctor came in and told me I'm not actually wearing shoes, but how could I disprove him? This kind of thing went on and on. Until finally, Descartes came upon his grand insight. Ah, I'm *thinking*, therefore I exist. That has to be true. I couldn't exist if I weren't thinking, even when doubting my own existence. So therefore I exist. *I think, therefore I am*. It's amazing the way Descartes shaped the way people thought for centuries about truth and what we can trust and what it takes to act on your convictions.

More recently, a lot of people who think about these things are less sure that Descartes' anxiety should have had such influence over us all. They say, you know, we just have to live with a little uncertainty, and that's ok. We have to be able to make decisions based on what we know and trust and what we know and trust others who help us to make sense of what we know. It's not perfect; there is no perfect. It's enough. It turns out we all live on faith no matter what.

We come to these points in life quite often, even if we're not wrecked by the anxiety that he was, sometimes we are. I confess something of the gospel; will I live in its therefore? The ultimate test of this for Jesus was the cross, a cross he tells us we must take up if we are to be his followers. Will I live what I believe when it comes to trusting the way of Christ—in those places where the rubber meets the road: with my vocation and work, with money and generosity and anxiety, when faced with hurt and the choice to forgive, to staying faithful to my marriage vows, to loving my neighbors? Will I live what I say? Will the words of my mouth and meditation of my heart become manifested in my actions, no matter the cost? Will I trust Jesus to show me the way, and when I fail, (and I will), will I trust the grace of God to restore me?

These are not always easy questions. Rarely, actually, are they easy. And that's why Nicodemus is an important and relevant image of faith and almost-faith. He has a lot to lose. He has everything to gain.

There's another character in the gospels who is like that as well. The person we only know of as a rich, young, ruler who also has a lot to lose to follow Jesus, but he walks away sad. He can't get over the hump of the cost to his riches. Nicodemus is a little different. He doesn't quite walk away, but he doesn't quite become a disciple. Or does he? In chapter 7, he argues to his fellow religious leaders that Jesus should be heard out, and they mocked him for it. In chapter 19, he is at the cross helping prepare Jesus' body for burial by bringing costly ointments. As far as he was willing or able to go with Jesus, he paid a price. John never gives us much insight into what's stirring in his heart. All we know is that he didn't walk away. I think that's encouraging.

It's encouraging for everyone whose tongue is tied at the 'therefore,' who can't quite get the word out. Everyone who's afraid of commitment, everyone who's afraid of risking something big for something good. Everyone whose life looks like: "I believe in you Jesus, but right now that's as far as I can go."

Another unnamed person in the gospel was in a similar situation, the one who uttered, "I believe, help my unbelief." It's a good prayer.

All this time, after Nicodemus' opening confession, Jesus has held silence, waiting for him to continue. Nicodemus has been silent, too, knowing what he should say, knowing what he wants to say. Is it an awkward silence? Maybe. But maybe a blessed silence between two people who can leave unspoken what is unspoken and give one another the grace of some breathing room. The ministry of silence is the ministry of the Spirit to the hidden places of the heart. And the Spirit always blows where it will.

Finally, Jesus breaks the silence and speaks. He speaks not to the head but to the heart, to the soul. He sees through to the heart of things, especially to the heart of one seated right in front of him.

"You know, friend, you're so close, so very close. But your very next step will mean everything, and it is not one small step for a man. It is a giant leap of faith. Unless one is reborn, he cannot see the kingdom of God. This is totally mysterious, but we know deeply true. There just comes a point when you can only shuffle so far along with your reasoning. At some point, there's a leap of faith. This is true in almost every area of life.

To decide to get married and commit to the vows.

To leave your job or career that you need to leave and to start over.

To tell the truth about something you've been lying to yourself about for a long time.

To admit an addiction and ask someone you trust for help.

To leave home and begin a new life.

To become a Christian and be baptized.

I say this to everyone who feels like you're right there with Nicodemus. The next step is not just a step of intellectual decision-making; it's a trust-fall. That's why we baptize the way we do. The person being baptized symbolizes their faith by being lowered, immersed, submerged into the water. It is a sign of the act of faith. I release myself into the hands of God all the way down and all the way up. All the way.

Lent is a time for remembering the 'therefore' of our baptisms and for examining the 'therefore' of your faith's next steps. Bring the 'therefore' in your prayer. Have the courage of the 'therefore,' and God will be your help for all that comes next. If you think you will have nowhere to stand, have faith. You will find solid ground, solid enough for the walk that is yet to come.