

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Endings and Beginnings

John 3

May 30, 2021

Nicodemus was tops in his class in Pharisee school. He was that kid, the one who sits on the front row, raises his hand to answer every question and knows the difference between jot and tittles. He could do those word math problems in his head; you know the ones: It's a sabbath day. Larry has a rock in his right pocket. If Larry is walking northeast at 500 cubits/hour and the rock weighs 10 shekels, how many steps can Larry take before he breaks sabbath law and God smites him? Nick would figure it out. He was that kid. The bright shining star of the class of 21.0021 at Jerusalem's Pharisee High School. The Fighting Seraphims. They were undefeated that year.

On the day of graduation, Rabbi Hillel handed him his parchment diploma and said, you're gonna go far, Nick. I'm really proud of you. And Nick kinda figured it was true. He was tops. The captain of the stone throwing team; leader of the debate club. A master of Hebrew and Greek, His letter jacket patch had an aleph and an alpha. Nicodemus, star pupil, leader of the pack, up and coming scholar, on the fast track to Pharisee Law School following the path his father took and his father took before him. But one night, everything changed for him. His curiosity led him to Jesus, that homeschool kid who'd started shaking the establishment. That visit that night changed Nicodemus. He was never the same.

Like Nicodemus and like a few of you this weekend, I graduated school once upon a time. I was no Nicodemus, but I was a good student, confident in my ability to handle college. I went off with a lot of eagerness and high expectations. Then everything fell apart, at least for a time. I want to tell that story this morning because the lessons learned there are lessons I hope will stay with you whether you've just graduated from kindergarten, and we're so proud of you. Or just graduated from 5th grade and we're so proud of you, or 8th grade, or high school, or college or graduate school, or you've graduated from one part of your life to the next. Those transition seasons tend to define who we are.

It all fell apart when my parents got my grades. Lyle Lovett and Robert Earl Keen became famous partly because of a song they wrote about their old front porch in College Station, TX where they waved to Presbyterians coming out of church on Sunday mornings and where they talked about girls and where they were gonna move to when their parents got their grades. Well, I lived their song, at least the grade part. Midway through my 1st semester the university sent home midterm grades. I don't think they do that anymore. But they did then. Mine were, uh, not so good. They were terrible, and the thing is, I was studying harder than I ever had in high school. I was failing, just about failing in everything.

This was a new experience for me.

That day changed a lot in my life. This was a practical crisis. I was in academic trouble. It was an existential crisis. Who am I anymore? Am I a success or a failure? Am I the person I thought I was or the person Intro to American History thinks I am? I don't know where to rank midterm grades on the scale of existential crises, and maybe it doesn't sound like much compared to that trauma that so many go through, for sure. But when you're 18 and far from home, and the only letter in your mailbox is a brochure from Tarrant County Junior College your parents send you, it's a lot to take in.

I went for a walk around the sprawling campus just to be alone and get my thoughts together. Dorm life isn't the most contemplative space. I must have walked an hour or two, searching out what had happened and how I'd let things get so bad so quickly. Somehow or another I ended up in the chapel on the campus. Before that day, I'm not sure I'd been in the chapel. I sat there in the lonely silence and prayed. And I remembered what I'd been taught in church. **God is always with you.**

That's the first word I want to share with you. God is always with you. You are never alone. On a dark night Nicodemus went to Jesus. Jesus tells him about the Holy Spirit's presence like a blowing in the wind. At the moment I felt like I was being blown apart, God's fresh wind blew in my life. You are not alone. You may feel alone. You will feel alone. But you are not alone. You are never alone.

In Isaiah's vision the hem of God's robe filled the temple; the glory of God filled the whole earth. The psalmist prays "Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I settle on the far side of the country or the far side of the sea, you are there." (Psalm 139)

I am with you always to the end of the age. This is a great and true promise. We are surrounded by Divine Love and no matter how far from home you go, you are a local call from God. Well, that's what we used to say. You don't even know what a local call is anymore. So, think of it like this: you're a whisper away, even when all you can whisper is "O God, Help".

After some time in that chapel, I went back up to my dorm and wandered down the hall to my friend's room. We'd become friends the first week of school and had been spending time together out since then, eating meals, going to games, throwing the football around. I went into Stephen's room. Stephen didn't have my problems. He had a 4.0 at midterm. Of course, he did. He would keep that 4.0 all semester, all year pre-med, until his senior year when he took a music appreciation course. B. He was crushed. I tried to be compassionate.

Anyway, Stephen was a friend that day. A good friend. And he still is today. Nicodemus went to Jesus in the middle of the night with serious questions about God, but they were also serious questions about himself. There's a lot of vulnerability in this story between him and Jesus. I like to think a deep connection was forged on that night.

That's the second word I want to share with you. **Friendships are underrated.** And often forged in the valleys of darkness. You'll have a lot of people in your life you connect with on social media. You'll have some people you are friendly with in your circles of living, classes, and activities. Those are all great. What your radar should be up for are the few people with whom you might have friendship. Friendship is rare. If you have 6 lifelong friends you are blessed beyond measure. Most of us are blessed to have 1-2. Friendliness is like Ligustrum, it's nice, it spreads, it's fine. Most friendships are like hackberries. Overlooked and a little underappreciated, but a good solid part of life's landscape. Lifelong Friends are oaks planted deep by streams of living water. Their branches stretch out and give shade and strength in the storms. They last. They endure.

Friendship is forged in shared experience over time. Trust is earned in vulnerability and compassion. I was pretty vulnerable that day. Stephen was a friend. I had opportunity to return the favor years later.

I'm told that college can be a lonely place these days, the great irony of a social media infused world. When everyone's supposedly connected all the time, people are disconnected connected in ways that really matter. Go against the grain and value friendship with real live human people.

Did Nicodemus and Jesus become friends. After Jesus' crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were the two people who took his body, wrapped it and set it in the tomb. Who is a lifelong friend if it is not the one who is there for you even to the end of life?

The third word is this, **you can always start again.** I got my act together, finished the semester with good grades and did much better after that. I suppose the actual lesson here is just **do your work.** That's not a bad lesson too. In fact, It's a good lesson for all of life. Do your work, your school work, your job work. Do the work that's been given you and be excellent at it. And if you follow my advice, starting on top with good work and keeping it going is a whole lot easier than starting with crummy work and trying to scramble up the steep mountain. Do your work.

Also do your inner work. College, life, marriage, spiritual life. Life is not just performing on exterior measures of competence, like exams; it's the inner work of growth and discernment and cultivation of virtue. Its spiritual formation. The lessons I learned in college from my peers and mentors about God and life was just as important as what I learned in the classroom about British Lit or differential equations. My inner work led me to discern a call to the pastorate. Yours will lead in different directions. And they will be awesome. Do your inner work. Your soul-tending. And spend time with the people who help you do your inner work to get the know the self that is being born in you.

But the third point, I guess it's the fourth now, **you can always start again.** Life is not an endless string of successes and victories and inner growth. You probably know that by now. Sometimes

the failures, the mistakes, the wrong turns, the broken heart, the sorrows . . . sometimes this is just what's needed to begin again.

This is the power of Jesus words; you must be born again. Jesus pictures the whole spiritual life as a rebirth, the most dramatic, and literally impossible, restart. The idea was so foreign to Nicodemus he stammered about how being reborn is literally impossible. (Nick got an A in biology.) Now look again. It's about starting over. You can always begin again. This is grace.

I pray your life is a long successive string of wins—in relationships, in academics and work, in spiritual growth, in friendships.

But no one's is. Even Dr. Seuss knew children could hear that wisdom and needed it. "Oh, the places you'll go," he wrote, and wrote in his classic style of the paths to be explored and the mountains you'll climb and the awards that will be earned and the contests that you'll win"

"Except when you don't, because, sometimes, you won't."

"Except when you don't, because sometimes you won't."

Indeed, sometimes you won't, but you can always begin again. That's what we mean by renewal. Jesus even seems to say this starting again is the key to relationship with God. You must be born again. Without this restart, without beginning again, you will never know God. Because God is in the places where you just have to begin again. Where you are broken down and God builds you back up. Where you are lost, and then you are found. Where you learn the truth and the meaning of you are not alone. God's spirit is with you, and true friends are with you.

To know God is to stand with Isaiah, in the echoes of the divine commission, and to say, "Here am I, send me." Wherever you wish to send me, I die to myself that I may live in you. I decrease that you may increase. Live in me, that I may live in you. Take my life, and let it be yours.

Wherever God leads you in life from this day forward, may you know you are not alone. May you have friends to share the journey. May you be entrusted with good work that you do well. May you begin again in Christ in whose death and resurrection we have life.

May the light of the world light each step of your way, and you may carry his light in your full heart and in your bright eyes. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

Amen.