

Sermon for The Second Sunday in Lent
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Journeying the Way of Love through Lent - Learn

Today's gospel reading is the first of three times we hear of Nicodemus in the Gospel of John. If I were to title this first encounter with Jesus I would call it "Nick at Night." Most of us have probably heard this passage of scripture more times than we can count. I don't know about you, but I always pictured Nic as a bit of a buffoon -- talking past Jesus as he took Jesus literally, asking how can an adult be born a second time.



But I heard this story afresh this time around. This time I wondered if maybe Nic understood all too well what Jesus was saying. Nic asks, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" What if Nic wasn't asking, how can an old man become a newborn again, but something else. The words "grown old" makes me pause. I mean wouldn't even a two-day old baby have a hard time being born a second time. So then what is the significance of "grown old"?

Maybe, Nic does know what Jesus is talking about by saying being born again. Maybe Jesus means starting over in a new order, under a different reign. See Nic is a prestigious man. He is a pharisee and an elder of his community. And with his roles came great respect, great honor, and great responsibility. If he is to completely follow Jesus, he will have to turn his back on all that he has done for himself. In the Hebrew culture of Nic's time, with age comes a wisdom that is respected by all. To become like a child again, means giving up on this respect and starting over from scratch. Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God, offering wealth and prestige that comes from a different world than the earthly world and its illusions of power. Is Nic ready to become part of this different world?

Nic's story starts early in Jesus' ministry, veiled in the darkness of night, as Nic seeks Jesus in secret, and finds himself torn between his place as a pharisee and a place in God's kingdom. But his story does not end here. We meet Nic two more times in the gospel of John: in Chapter 7 it is Nic who seems to go to bat for Jesus in the midst of the pharisees condemning him, and then in chapter 19, Nic comes in broad daylight, no longer hiding in the darkness, and brings an abundance of myrrh and aloe to care for the body of the crucified Jesus. Nic's transformation does not take place suddenly, in a moment, but instead over time.



Learning is a lifelong journey. Nic's story teaches us that we must be willing to let go of what we hold most dear so we can grab onto what Jesus offers us. And even then, it doesn't often come quickly, but over time. Nic begins learning from the Word Made Flesh in chapter 3, at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry but Nic doesn't "arrive" until chapter 19 after Jesus has been killed.

We all know that there are seasons of learning, starting a new school or job, becoming a parent for the first time, moving to a new area. But I think if we are each honest with ourselves, we'll admit that sometimes it is easier to refrain from learning. We become comfortable with the way things are instead of trying to stretch our minds and our hearts. I also believe that part of the reason why we avoid learning is because we are hesitant to give up, or let go of what

we hold to be truth. We hold onto our idea of truth so tightly, just like Nic is trying to hold on to his status. If we let go of what we believe to be true, to make room to learn, we are putting ourselves in a very vulnerable situation.

It not only feels uncomfortable, but it can feel unsafe. Everything might change. Maybe there is fear that in the end there won't be any truth at all to hold onto. Even still we are called to continue to be learners.

Learning comes in many forms, but what I have found learning done in relationship with others is often the most effective. Nic and Jesus are establishing a relationship and the learning is being done within this relationship. I have had most of my "letting go to learn" moments within relationship with other people, when I've cleared away enough of myself--my views, my beliefs, my ideas, to make room for someone else and their realities, views, beliefs and ideas.

I am not suggesting that there is no singular truth. For I truly believe that there is one ultimate truth. But I do believe that having others as teachers helps me to set aside what can be my skewed lense, to begin to see the truth in a new light and gain greater understanding. God is the ultimate source of truth. And so learning truth best comes from being in relationship with God. God teaches us in so many ways, through the Son of God, through other people, through creation, through spiritual practices, through scripture, all of which is through the Holy Spirit.

This Lenten season we are exploring the 7 practices of the *Way of Love*, as given to us by the Episcopal Church. This week's practice is to Learn. The church offers: "By reading and reflecting on Scripture, especially the life and teachings of Jesus, we draw near to God and God's word dwells in us. When we open our minds and hearts to Scripture, we learn to see God's story and God's activity in everyday life."

Learning of God through scripture is certainly not the only way to learn from God. And we have all witnessed the misuse of scripture that ends up distracting us with something that is far removed from the truth of who is God. But these are not reasons to avoid the reading of scripture.

Some of us already have the practice of reading scripture almost every day. But maybe this Lent is a time to approach how we read scripture differently. There are so many ways to read and study scripture, maybe to Practice the *Way of Love* is to try a different approach.

But I suspect for many of us, we don't spend much time in scripture. We hear it weekly at church and that may be our only encounter during the week. No judgement here! I get it. There are other books we want to read, or life is just too busy at all to pick up any book. For some of us we might have a sense that we've heard all of the bible so many times. And so we ask, "Is it really worth reading it again?"



I would like to offer a quick music analogy that might be helpful: My favorite music artist is the Dave Matthews Band. DMB was one of the first CDs I ever purchased as a young teen. When I was in high school my friends called my car the Dave-mobil, because DMB was about the only thing that would come out of my speakers. In 1998 the song Crush came out. This is one of my all-time favorite songs. I would listen to it on repeat. I LOVE this song and will happily sing every word with the band.

I thought I knew this song inside and out, but then one day, 10 years after its release, I was laying in bed one evening listening to the song on my new iPod. I don't know if it was because it was played on a different device or what, but I heard the violin piece for the first time quietly playing underneath the verses of the song. It had been there all along but I had never heard it before. All of a sudden the song came alive for me as if I was hearing it for the first time.

This is what reading scripture can be like, even the most familiar passages can be heard anew as if being heard for the first time. Of course this doesn't happen every time but it is only by making the reading of scripture part of our regular rhythm that we give scripture the chance to speak to us in a fresh way.

So don't stop listening. When the spirit wants to, the spirit invites us to hear that proverbial violin part that was hidden there all along. Nic does not get it in a day. It takes him a few years of

observing Jesus, of talking with Jesus, before he gets it, years before he is ready to let go of what honors he holds, to take on the otherworldly privilege of serving God. It takes years of learning.

To grow in the Way of Love we are to surround ourselves with opportunities to learn of God's love. Sometimes learning of this love requires us letting go of other thoughts, and it requires regularly showing up as students, and the truth won't come all in one sitting, but over time we will find ourselves being made new as we become more fully dwellers of the Kingdom of God's love.

What practice may you add to your daily and weekly routine to be an intentional student of God?

Never stop listening. Never stop learning.

**Jesus' way has the power
to change each of our lives
and to change this world.**

- Presiding Bishop Michael Curry

#WAYOFLOVE



THE WAY OF LOVE
Practices for Jesus-Centered Life