

Kirk of St James
Sunday March 12, 2017
Sermon "First Steps"
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

My niece was the first baby born in my immediate family in 27 years. Her father (my brother) had been the last baby. When we heard that she was expected we waited excitedly month after month. Then her due date came and went, then a week passed and, another one until finally (one day after my birthday) Callie Marguerite Henderson arrived in the world late but, very much loved. On the day the new parents were supposed to come home from the hospital Chad and I took a load of meals up to them and as they came in the house and I saw the three of them together for the first time, I finally understood that the world would never be quite the same. While I was marveling at that fact Chad was wondering about something else entirely. When they took off her hat to reveal a full head of dark hair Chad said "wow, I didn't know they could come like that!" Whenever there is new life, whenever there is birth, life changes and it is never quite the same again. It is this reality that poor old Nicodemus is pondering in our passage today. "How can you be born again?" "Can you be born a second time?" His conversation with Jesus is not revealing the answers he was most likely expecting, but they are going to change his life.

While sometimes the Pharisee's are cast as the opposition and shortsighted visionaries, in this passage it is a little different. Nicodemus is inquisitive, he is questioning, and he is searching for answers. One writer who described Nicodemus said "If any character from the Bible can be regarded as representative of twenty-first-century church members, it might be Nicodemus. In many ways he is a sympathetic character. A successful and self-confident man, he plays a leadership role in his community. He is spiritually open and curious, yet also rational. He also approaches Jesus directly and tries to figure out Jesus' actions and social networks. He is committed and curious enough that

he makes an appointment to meet Jesus face to face. However, Nicodemus is not ready to go public with his interest in Jesus, so he makes the appointment in the middle of the night, where he can keep his faith secret, separated from the rest of his life. His imagination is caught by Jesus, but he wants to compartmentalize whatever faith he has. Nicodemus is not yet ready to declare his faith in the light of day, not prepared to let it change his life." Nicodemus wants to understand, maybe there is even something he is hoping to hear but, he is not ready to claim it yet.

I often wonder about Nicodemus because he was so desperate to meet Jesus and ask him questions yet too afraid to do so in the light of day. What was he afraid of? Was he afraid other Pharisee's would judge him? Was he afraid of losing his job? Was he afraid to hope for something more? It is significant that in this account Nicodemus does not open with a question, he opens with a very powerful statement. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Nicodemus is not asking if Jesus is the son of God--he already knows the answer. What I regret about this passage is that we do not know what question led Nicodemus to Jesus in the middle of the night, and we don't know why it was so important. What follows becomes one of the most well known passages in the bible.

The words in this story are well known, and I have always focused on the final two verses "for God so loved the world..." Up until this week I have entirely missed the brief but incredible story of this Pharisee whose story is told in a matter of verses in John but, whose example quietly stands as a testimony for all time. Up until this point in John's gospel we have never heard of Nicodemus. After this well known encounter Nicodemus disappears into the shadows and we hear nothing of him until chapter 7 when the Pharisee's are debating who Jesus is what should be done about him. In the middle of this conversation Nicodemus briefly reappears and intercedes on Jesus' behalf and then he is

gone again only to enter our story one final time--he comes with Joseph of Arimathea to collect the body of Jesus after the crucifixion and together they prepare the body of Jesus and bury him. Only three times in the entire of book John is Nicodemus mentioned. As one writer described it "of the many images in John's gospel, two major ones are light and darkness. Nicodemus emerges out of the night's darkness, seeking light from the teacher he believes to be sent from God. Just as suddenly as he appears, Nicodemus disappears back into the night from whence he came...Jesus' last words are, "Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." It will take Nicodemus a long time--until chapter 19--to come once and for all out of the night and into the light." In these few passages we see the questioning Pharisee grow in his faith.

He begins so convicted of what he knows to be true, yet so afraid of what others will think that he will only meet Jesus at night. Then later he speaks up against his fellow Pharisee's and by the end he is so changed that he boldly goes to collect the body of Jesus and help bury it. Nicodemus is no longer afraid. One biblical scholar described Nicodemus' first midnight visit to Jesus as being like a child still safe in his mother's womb. "You are still gestating" Jesus seems to imply, you must be born again, and declare this faith in the light of day. There are a number of ways you can interpret Jesus' words to be born from above. Some read it as a command--that you must do this, while others see it more as an invitation. I have always liked the invitation rendering of the passage more. I believe that when "Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born again by water and spirit, he is asking Nicodemus to let God work in his life."

That invitation to Nicodemus is the same one that God extends to us today. "Let me work in your life" God says. "Let me make you new, and whole, and complete." It is not something we can do, it is something that we can only receive. "Rebirth is God's gift to

give, God's work to accomplish, and it is God who labours to bring us new life."

Nicodemus really is one of the more relatable biblical characters. At first we to shelter in the shadows where it is warm and comfortable. Then we are stretched in new ways much like Nicodemus when he begins to stand up to the other Pharisee's. Finally he boldly lays claim to his faith and steps out into the light of day. It is hard sometimes to take that final step. We know that we are to trust God, we know that we are to have faith and lean on him but, when it is time to take that final step out from the shallows and into deep water it is scary. It is easier to wait in the shadows but, we miss out on so much more that is possible.

Nicodemus' life is never the same after that first encounter with Christ. While it takes time he grows in his faith, and by the end of John's gospel it is difficult to believe that it is the same man. During this second week of Lent my prayer for all of us is that we continue to grow and stretch like Nicodemus. That we take steps that move us out of our comfort zones and into new territory. I pray that we discover the same life changing moments that Nicodemus does. It is always scary when we takes steps in our faith. Whenever I watch young children learn to walk I am reminded of this. At first hanging onto their parents hands and every piece of furniture they can reach. They circle the room from one piece of furniture to the next. Then one day they take a few steps out into the middle of the room and before we know it they are running on feet as swift as deer. May we be brave enough to take those first steps and find ourselves not just walking but, rather running joyfully in brand new directions.