

Faith is not a noun
By Rev. Katie Suddeth

Were you ever afraid of the dark as a child? Or maybe not afraid of the dark, but was in the dark- the things you couldn't see? As I mentioned last week, I was a very zealous child with a great big imagination. I had a hard time not with the dark itself, but what waited in the dark. It seemed like a scary unknown place- full of mystery and bad things.

I was also in love with Disney's Beauty and the Beast so as a child, my mom got me a stuffed animal version of the beast. She told me he would protect me during the night and I had nothing to worry about. Well unbeknownst to her, this just gave me permission to move about the house in the dark of night freely as long as I carried the beast with me. She didn't know that was what I took from her loving gesture until one night she heard a strange noise, she went downstairs to the kitchen, only to find me, and the beast, sitting on the kitchen counter with the tub of butter and a spoon. If you needed any more proof of my southern roots, I am not sure a kid would go for butter unless they were from the south.

Nicodemus in this story reminds me of a child sneaking around in the dark to get something. When we find him in the story, we find that he is coming to Jesus out of the darkness of

night to seek the light from the great teacher. In the gospel of John, light and dark are themes that John uses as metaphor for coming to faith. We are in darkness until we come to faith in which case we have come to light. Nicodemus is one of the best examples of this, because it will take him until chapter 19 to start to set out of darkness and into the light.

In today's text, we see very clearly that Nicodemus is not ready to follow Jesus anywhere but afar. He believes Jesus is sent from God and teaches truth, but he is not ready to let that belief transform his life. I think many of us can relate to Nicodemus.

One commentator called Nicodemus the patron saint of the twenty-first century church member. That stings a little, but the commentator was attempting to point out that a lot of us struggle with actually putting our faith into our actions-I will be the first one to admit I struggle with this. It is easier for us to stop at John 3:16 than for us to read the rest of what Jesus said. It is much safer to follow Jesus from afar without actually having to live like Christ has called us to-

To love God above all else, to love your neighbor as thyself. To show loving kindness to not only people we like, but the people that annoy us. It is much easier to believe in Jesus and his teachings from afar than to actually put them into action.

However, Jesus is making a point in today's text though that faith is not a noun. It is not a thing we have, but a way of living. We often view Jesus in this text as giving commands, but Jesus is not a forceful messiah. What if Jesus isn't giving a command when he tells Nicodemus that he needs to be baptized by spirit and water, but is inviting Nicodemus to allow God to do real work in his life?

Nicodemus doesn't understand the invitation Jesus is giving. John is using Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the dark to remind us of the metaphor and that Nicodemus is unable to understand what Jesus is saying because he is not ready to be transformed by his belief. He isn't ready, thus he takes what Jesus is saying as a literal rebirth.

Jesus's response seems as though he is giving divine judgment on Nicodemus.

What if Jesus was using a rabbinical irony or humor to meet Nicodemus in his ignorance with compassion?

What if Jesus would meet the 21st century church member with humor and compassion instead of the divine judgment we often feel we are met with?

John is trying to affirm Jesus's point in this story that faith is not a noun. Faith is a verb. In this gospel, being born from above

and believing in Jesus are clearly not so much about what one does with one's mind as about what one does with one's life. That is given to us in verse 21, "those who do what is true come to the light, so it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." For John, believing and doing are inseparable.

However, Jesus's approach to Nicodemus- to meet him with a little bit of humor and a whole lot of compassion- reminds us that even though believing and doing are inseparable in this gospel does make it any less complicated or easy. In my mind, this makes it more complicated.

If believing and doing are inseparable then we have to accept that this is an ambiguous effort on our parts. Faith as a verb is subject to all of the ambiguity, uncertainty, and indecisiveness of being human. By having an incarnate God, it becomes a necessity to have an incarnate faith- meaning that believing is just as complicated as being human.

We struggle as humans to understand how Jesus could be fully divine and fully human. An incarnate God leads to more questions than answers. Sometimes we pretend we get it, sometimes we do get it, and other times it just doesn't make sense. It is supposed to be beyond our human understanding.

The point with Nicodemus is to remind us that we don't have to fully understand to allow God to do work in our lives. Faith is

just as complicated as the human experience. It is full of ups and downs, turns and flips. It is not linear and baptism is a beginning, not an end. When Jesus is talking to Nicodemus by being baptized by spirit and water, he is inviting Nicodemus to embrace the complexity that is the process of faith. The process of embracing your questions, fears, and hesitations and allowing God to walk alongside you. When we do this, we are stepping out of the darkness, and embracing the light.

Only then can our faith move from believing from afar and become a verb- putting our faith into action.

Earlier, I told you about a commentator who called Nicodemus the patron saint of 21st century church member. There is truth to that and some humor, however it seems more appropriate to call him Nicodemus, the patron saint of complexity.

Nicodemus appears again in the book John- two times to be exact. He first appears again in chapter 7. Here he tries to defend Jesus with a group of pharisees-

This is important. John is using the story of Nicodemus to show that he is slowly but surely stepping out of the darkness and embracing light. Nicodemus is not losing any of the complexity, because he only slightly defends Jesus-

Being a proud keeper of Jewish law, he tries to use the law that Jesus has come to free the people from to defend Jesus. Thus,

being met by another pharisee debunking his point with the law itself. One could imagine that this sends Nicodemus into a thought spiral of reanalyzing what he has known to be true and what his faith is showing him.

This is the complexity of an incarnate faith as it is a process.

The next time we see Nicodemus is in chapter 19. This is the pivotal moment for the reader that has been keeping up with Nicodemus' journey. Nicodemus comes to help bury Jesus. Bringing with him a box of traditional spices. John is using this moment to show that Nicodemus had moved from coming to Jesus in the dark to embracing the light- that he is accepting Jesus's invitation. Showing us the complexity of Nicodemus's story- the struggle and the embracing.

As I said last week, Lent is a season that serves not only as a reminder of our humanity, but also as a reminder of the process of faith. Last week we focused on Jesus's humanity- something we often overlook to focus on his divinity. Nicodemus is chosen as a traditional lenten text I believe to serve as a reminder for us of our humanity.

Jesus brings divinity to the human level. He understands both the divine and humanity, and he maps a path of understanding for us. Nicodemus reminds us that though Jesus maps it out for us that that does not make it any easier to follow or

understand. That the process of incarnate faith is just as complicated as the human experience.

Lent gives us the opportunity to embrace this complexity and to sit in the darkness and struggle that is taking our faith from only being a noun and turning our faith into a verb.

It is 40 days in the wilderness of us embracing the struggle, so we may step into the freedom that comes with embracing the process and the light-

Only in this freedom can we receive the mystery that is Easter.

It is much more comfortable for us to follow Jesus from afar-
To come to him in the darkness of night-

Then to attempt to embrace the complexity that is the process of faith-

The complexity that is allowing God to do real work in our lives.

My prayer for us this Lenten season is that we will embrace the process and not expect perfection.

That we will struggle in the darkness of the wilderness so when the time comes that we can fully embrace easter light-
experiencing a new found freedom in our process of faith.

That we will sit with what it means to be human- the complexity of our humanity.

That we will receive a Nicodemus transformation- one in which we do not run from the complexity of an incarnate faith, but embrace it.

May we embrace our humanity so we can fully see Christ's divinity.

Amen.