

“Is your faith growing?” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
March 12, 2017 Second Sunday in Lent
John 3:1-17

Prayer: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Linda and I enjoy a yoga class on Sunday evenings. It's a great way for both of us to relax after a busy day. Recently, I shared with the class I had read an article in the LA Times that said people who were not Christ-followers were taking on Christian Lenten practices such as fasting or denying oneself something of importance in one's life. The yoga instructor latched onto the idea of a Lenten spiritual practice and asked the class members what they were giving up for Lent. Well, as you can imagine, some people were Christ-followers who had thought about their Lenten spiritual practices and were giving up something, others hadn't thought about it, while some folks were downright hostile and offended that such a question would be asked. Such is the state of the world today. There are those who are believers, those who are curious and lukewarm and those that are hostile to anything quote 'Christian.'

Where would you say Nicodemus would fit into my yoga class if he were alive today and taking yoga? Was he a person who had thought about his faith, someone who was neutral, neither hot nor cold, or was he someone who was hostile to faith and spiritual practices?

The Bible says that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a religious leader of the Jews. So, Nicodemus was certainly someone who had thought about his faith. He seemed to be curious about Jesus. Curious enough to look into who Jesus was by visiting Jesus. We could say he probably was neutral about Jesus, not committed, but looking for answers.

We know from two other references to Nicodemus in John's biography of Jesus, that Nicodemus must have grown in faith after meeting with Jesus. In the seventh chapter of John, we read that Nicodemus stood up for Jesus when the Jewish ruling council was questioning Jesus. We again encounter Nicodemus in John 19, where we read that Nicodemus provided the embalming spices at Jesus' death and assisted Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial.

This story about Nicodemus' nighttime visit to Jesus is the first time we meet Nicodemus in John's Gospel. In today's story, he comes at night to meet with Jesus. Was the nighttime visit done so others would not see him coming to visit? Was the nighttime visit simply a part of Nicodemus normal evening routine of studying the Torah after dark and having theological dialogue after the day's activities were done? We can't say for sure, but just consider that Nicodemus, being a good Jewish rabbi, came to Jesus to get more information.

If the visit was about theological dialogue, Nicodemus certainly engages Jesus in discussion and reacts to Jesus' comments. Nicodemus asks three questions. "How can one be born after having grown old?" "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" "How can these things be?" I give him lots of credit for being curious enough to engage Jesus in conversation on Jesus' home turf, not in the temple where Nicodemus would have the advantage. Unlike the hostile folks in my yoga class, Nicodemus was open to discuss and possibly learning something new.

Nicodemus was curious and open to understanding who Jesus was and how that could transform his faith. I wish more people were like that. I've often run into folks who are like the hostile students in my yoga class. They shut off any discussion of faith, let alone any discussion of Jesus.

What can we learn from Nicodemus? During the Lenten season, I think we can learn that questioning one's faith helps us to grow in our faith. Nicodemus may not have had faith in Jesus to start with, but it certainly looks like his faith grew to the point of taking care of Jesus' body when Jesus was crucified. Asking for Jesus' body and spending big bucks on embalming spices announced Nicodemus' faith to the community in which he lived. His faith had certainly grown from that first nighttime visit.

What about your faith? Has it grown over the years? Do you admit to your friends and relative that you're a Christ-follower – even when you know you might encounter a hostile reaction to your faith?

Perhaps you, like Nicodemus, are puzzled about things Jesus says, things you can't quite understand. What is your reaction to Jesus' comments about being born from above? Are you unsure like Nicodemus of how to respond to Jesus' comments about being born from above? Do you have Christian friends who keep asking you if you are saved or born again? Is that what Jesus is talking about when he says, **no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit**? Perhaps you, like Nicodemus, came to faith slowly, and are still a work in process. While others you may know have come to faith in a dramatic way. Both are valid paths to faith. However, those who have come to faith at a slower pace may have the advantage in that they realize that coming to faith is a process, a lifelong process, not a one-time event. No matter how you come to faith, growing in faith is a lifelong process.

Nicodemus demonstrates to us that we can grow in our faith, that we can question and try to understand as we grow. Nicodemus shows us that we can move forward and better understand our faith in God and our savior Jesus Christ.

This Lent, take time to check out where you are in your faith journey. Are you beginning to understand **'heavenly things'**? Whether you're seeing clearly in the light or are still finding your way in the early light of the dawn, I pray that your faith, like Nicodemus', may continue to grow and develop.

I can't go without mentioning John 3:16. Most Christ-followers have memorized this verse. Why do we need to grow in faith? Because we have a God who loves the whole world. God does not ask you if you want to be a recipient of God's love. God just goes ahead and loves you. God goes even further. To show God's love for the world, God gives the world God's only beloved son over to death – death on a cross.

What do you do with that kind of intense, unconditional, unfathomable love? God loves us whether we like it or not. God loves those in that yoga class even if they do not acknowledge God's existence. In the face of a love that strong and profound, you will most likely accept it thankfully or run away screaming. No one can remain neutral to such extravagant love.

I pray that you will accept God's love and grow in faith.