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“Following at One’s Own Pace”

Part V of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Following”

John 3:1-8, 7:50-51, 19:38-40

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Sometimes, when I get home after being gone a week or a weekend, I don’t have time to unpack my bag (or at least I tell myself that). Millie might be sitting on the porch ready to catch up, and *I do love a good porch sit*. Or maybe supper is ready, or a game is on, or it is late at night. At bedtime, I’ll open the bag to get out a couple of things—my PJs, my glasses—but the rest can wait to be unpacked.

That’s what I am going to do with the three passages in John that speak of Nicodemus, especially the first passage that lasts an entire chapter. That chapter—chapter 3—is a favorite of mine; so rich, so nuanced... so much to unpack. But with other things going on in this service and a congregational meeting to boot, I don’t have time to unpack all there is to unpack in this chapter, especially with two more passages to visit. I’ll just take out what I need to talk about why the author speaks of Nicodemus at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of his Gospel.

Let’s start with the first encounter which lasts a chapter. To save time, I’ll read just the first eight verses. Listen in on part of the conversation Nicodemus has with Jesus..., and listen to see if God is in on the conversation as well.

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **2** He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” **3** Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” **4** Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one



enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The Chapter 3 Bag is packed but I will just pull out one thing: "He came to Jesus by night." This is a private conversation. No one else's business.

Why Nicodemus wants this conversation to be private is open to speculation. Is it risky for Nicodemus, being a Pharisee, to be seen with Jesus? After all, by the end the Gospel, the community of Pharisees of which Nicodemus is a part, are working actively to silence Jesus. To cancel him.

Maybe we don't usually get ourselves in situations that dangerous but surely we know the feeling of not wanting to be exposed for what we are thinking when people we care about might disapprove.

- Secretly enjoying a show or movie, or listening to a podcast, of someone the culture has canceled—someone the culture has declared as *persona non grata*.
- A friend's marriage breaks up, or two friends are fighting, and you feel pressure to take sides, so you privately check in with both of them.

I'll show my age and tell you this memory. Some of you who are as old as I am remember how back in the Cold War years there was another season of book bans and burnings. To read and study Karl Marx was to some like admitting to being a communist. At least that was the way it was with some people I knew in Marion Indiana and, judging by the news, in other places. So, when I took a political science class in college and was assigned readings from *The Communist Manifesto*, it felt like I was sneaking away. I didn't want people to find out. It wasn't the book I left on my nightstand. That was *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. I didn't become a Marxist, or a Communist, but reading Marx honestly helped me gain clarity as to what I believe as a Christian. But that was not something I wanted to explain to some of my Christian friends back home.

So, maybe Nicodemus felt he was putting himself at risk being seen with Jesus.

But I don't think that's the case here. I don't think that things have gotten that hot yet between Jesus and Nicodemus' community of Pharisees. Jesus is certainly a public figure and is getting a lot of attention. There may be flags, but Jesus is not Public Enemy #1. In fact, there are good reasons for Pharisees to seek Jesus out by day to have a conversation_which they do in the Gospel. They check him out and have conversations with him to see if they're on the same page.

No, I don't think Nicodemus is afraid as being of being seen as crossing enemy lines. I think his reasons are more personal. Something is going on inside of him that is

- too delicate to be exposed to the sun,
- too fragile to be handled roughly.



He is fascinated with what he has heard about Jesus and thinks that maybe, maybe, there is something to him. As a Pharisee, he is known for knowing God—and yet he doesn't know God as he wants to know God, and maybe he can know God better through this one that others are calling “A Man of God.”

But to bring anyone else in on this right now, asking their questions of Jesus, asking their questions of him, pushing for a debate, or maybe expecting him to answer by night what he is telling everyone else by day? That could ruin it.

Oh goodness, we know how this is too.

- Eddie wants to try ballet, but he just wants to go to a few lessons without having his buddies make their jokes.
- Garcia is thinking about accepting a job in another city, but his family would be upset even to know there's a possibility their lives might get upended.
- Jim? (Don't want Eddie and Ed in same thought) is thinking about retiring but doesn't want anyone to talk him into it or out of it.
- Sheila wants to see a counselor. She is not embarrassed about it, most of her friends have seen counselors. Still, what she is going through is no one's business because she doesn't want to talk about it—except with the counselor.
- George doesn't want to share what he's thinking about his sermon because it's not interesting yet, and all it would take is one person saying that and the sermon is done. Dead.

Ok, maybe that last example is about me. But I think we all can understand how some conversations need to be contained. I often have said to people who are working through something, and need to talk about it but don't want to talk about it with the world, to keep the circle of confidants only as large as they need it to be to help them deal.

Nicodemus' need for confidentiality has a unique flavor. His vulnerability is of the spiritual sort. Which is hard for him, because he is looked to as a spiritual authority. As a Pharisee, he is supposed to be the Go-To-Guy, not the Going-To-Guy. That's his vulnerability. Sometimes

- the helper needs help,
- the guide needs guidance,
- the leader needs direction.

Nicodemus is bold enough to seek Jesus out, but vulnerable enough to keep it between the two of them. He is not ready yet to admit to others

- his fascination with Jesus
- or that he has questions in areas in which he is supposed to supply the answers.

It's funny how Nicodemus, who thinks he has secrets, is an open book to Jesus. Nicodemus starts the conversation by paying Jesus some compliments about being a leader and someone



through whom God shines. Then Jesus answers by responding to a question Nicodemus hasn't even asked. Nicodemus tries to play it formal, but Jesus makes it personal by responding as if he already knows that Nicodemus is here because

he has questions about faith—
about life with God—
about life eternal with God.

And so, Jesus speaks to Nicodemus' troubled spirit yearning for God's spirit, and how faith isn't going to come from Nicodemus working it out on his own. The life he seeks isn't going to come by his climbing back into his mother's womb and starting over. Life with God comes from God. It comes from above, by God's Spirit joining with his spirit in conversation and relationship. And this Spirit? It's like wind. You can't manage it; it comes and goes. You feel alive with it sometimes, you feel abandoned by it sometimes, but you remain open to it and don't give up on it because even when you don't feel the wind, you live in the air of God's Spirit.

I know I've begun unpacking the bag more than I said I would. Or trying to anyway. There is a lot to this passage, and there's room for lots of conversation about this conversation, and smart people would debate some of what I just said.

So, let's go back to this. Nicodemus' spiritual vulnerability is no one's business except the one he has come to for conversation.

And maybe you know what that is like too.

Maybe you love being in a community of faith.

- When it comes time to stand to affirm your faith, you stand too. But is it sacrilegious to say that there are some phrases of the Apostles' Creed you don't understand and maybe don't even believe?
- Or maybe, when the minister declares your sins are forgiven, you really don't think they are—*yet*. You still feel bad about something you said and did, and you need more than that moment of the preacher saying it's OK.
- Or maybe you have doubts about God caring about your problems with so many problems in the world, but you don't want to disappoint your good friend, Sophia, by admitting it... not knowing that Sophia is struggling with her faith too.

Then there are those who are not in a community of faith and are wary of trying one out in broad daylight. Maybe no one in your family or friend group goes to church. And maybe you're wary of trying out a faith community because you don't know what you'd be getting into. I mean, look at the bad press.

- Did priests really do what it is said that they did?
- Did preachers really take what has been reported they too?
- Is there a hidden agenda in church?
 - To get my money?
 - To make me more Democratic or more Republican?



You don't want to be used, manipulated or controlled. And yet, you sense that something, someone, is pulling on you, talking to you, and you don't know who to talk to about it.

On the other hand, there are those who have spiritual curiosity and your wariness does not have to do with fear or suspicion, but simply with not wanting to spoil a dish by turning the heat too high. Maybe you're curious about God and faith, but not ready to make any public affirmation or even to be seen. I wonder if there are some who attend church online because they want to attend church without being in church, to listen in on the conversation of worship without being asked to speak or respond.

What do I say to these people and others who are seeking, but are not yet asking me what I think?

Nothing. It's none of my business. It's between them and God. Like Nicodemus, they're having a conversation in private, and it is a good one. The Spirit moves as it will and I'll be in the conversation- this church will be in the conversation- if and when we're invited to be in the conversation. And particularly in this day and time, some trust needs to be established for that to be a possibility. There are some toxic ministers and faith communities out there interested only in institutional survival, or only in being right, or only in what you can do for them. Folks have a right to be wary of a church, as they have a right to be wary of any person trying to sell them something or enlist them in a cause. We publish our Annual Report, our worship services are online, the ministers are available, and it is easy to find out what goes on in this church and what we're doing and not doing in the community. We try to be transparent so folks can know us. But two things.

- First of all, we may not be invited in the conversation, and that's OK.
- Second of all, I would say to those who are seeking, "take a number." We ministers and members of this church community have our own questions and curiosity, and we're seeking to know God better ourselves, so if anyone is looking for the overly certain and confident spiritual answer—people, you may be more interested in those Pharisees Nicodemus sneaked away from. They'll be clear in telling you how it is. Only be careful, they can get mean when you don't see it their way.

Oh my goodness, look how much time I took with this first passage. Don't worry, though, I'm going to be brief with the Nicodemus encounters in the middle of John's Gospel and with the one at the end. The passages are listed in your bulletin so you can look them up, but I'll simply refer to them.

In the middle of the Gospel in chapter 7, things have gotten heated between Jesus and the Pharisees with whom Nicodemus hangs. They've vetted Jesus, then opposed him, and now are meeting as to how to cancel him. (I told you they can be mean). They join with other leaders in the community in sending Temple Police to arrest Jesus speaking at the Temple. But the police have come back saying that they were intrigued by what Jesus has to say. The Pharisees are furious at the police for even caring about what Jesus thinks. But Nicodemus steps a little into the light. He doesn't make a profession of faith, and he doesn't admit to having had a conversation with



Jesus and being equally intrigued. But he suggests that maybe the other Pharisees should give Jesus a hearing because maybe, just maybe, if they are open, they might be intrigued as well.

I won't dwell on it this time, but it is OK to say what you believe..., but not everything. We may be an open book to God, but sometimes it is not safe to be an open book to others around us. It's tough to have a fully open conversation when things are heated and agendas are so much in play. Some may say Nicodemus isn't saying enough. I think he is saying what he can. Sometimes you have to stop at what can be heard.

And now let's jump to the Gospel's end. Chapter 19 tells innocent children being killed, of vulnerable people being taken advantage of, of trust being violated, of lies being told for the purposes of greed, of innocence being violated for the purposes of power, of the great disillusionment that comes when governments fail its people and when religious people disgrace themselves before God.

I know, I'm starting to do some heavy unpacking again, but we can see the truth of all that in what happens in chapter 19, the execution of Jesus. But look at Nicodemus. Right at the point where Jesus is abandoned, Nicodemus joins. In the bright light of day that has exposed the wrong that can be done in the name of God and country, Nicodemus joins up with a follower of Jesus name Joseph of Arimathea to go before Pilate and ask that the body of the one Pilate ordered killed be given to them for proper burial. For whatever reason, Pilate, releases Jesus' body to be buried, but later does post guards at the grave to try to make sure that people don't later come to honor the one he had killed.

Never mind the obvious parallel to what recently happened in Russia, my point is that Nicodemus is in public now. He is acting now. We can see he hears God's voice in Jesus' death as much as he heard God's voice in Jesus' voice when Jesus was alive.

Nicodemus is being vulnerable, he is putting himself at risk, and he is doing it in public. And because it is impossible to live without others, he is aligning himself not with his Pharisee crowd that was about being right and being in charge when it comes to religious life but being with Joseph in serving Jesus even in death. And I trust that Nicodemus will be with the community of those, including other Pharisees, who become the vulnerable community of those who join to seek God together; attend to his teachings, pray with each other and attend to each other's needs. And this will be after they find that Jesus was right about God's Spirit doing what God's Spirit wants when the tomb is discovered empty, and Jesus is alive to them again.

I also trust that Nicodemus never stops with his questioning and seeking. And if that is true, I trust that others start coming to him because they recognize that he would be joining them in the same desire to know God better in their lives.

I would like to think that we are a community for Nicodemus in all stages of faith and life:

- like at the beginning with those searching, questioning, trying to parse out what it means to be a child of God in the world;



- like those in the middle, those whose faith is tentatively emerging as they express their thoughts without saying everything they are thinking, or doing all that others are doing;
- or at the end and those who are ready to take action and do some work to promote God's grace in the world.

That said, this sermon is not about talking people into joining our church, but rather praising people who seek God, and eventually community, in their own way and at their own pace. Until we are invited into the conversation, the search of others is none of our business, for God's Spirit moves how it will. It is our business to be a safe place where we; and God willing, others; can in private and in public explore ways to talk together and work together so as to know better God's love.

I think this church is good at this already, but I'm going to end my sermon with a charge anyway.

- Let's be open and not closed to the conversation of faith.
- Let's be inviting to others to join in without being manipulative or coercive.
- Let's be understanding when other church experiences cause some to question even trying this church.
- Let's be willing to talk without needing to win a debate.
- And let's trust that God's Spirit will blow where it will, so that when we find ourselves in conversation with others asking questions, speaking out, or serving God in the world, we can delight in not being alone.

