

“Helpful Qualities for All Who Seek an Ever-Maturing Faith”

John 3:1–17

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Someone has suggested that Nicodemus is a sympathetic character for many of us. He is successful and self-confident, a leader in his community. He is spiritually open and curious yet also rational. He won't fall for just any crazy idea. He is interested in Jesus, intrigued by his teaching, but he expresses this interest in a guarded way, under the cover of darkness. He is not yet ready to change his entire life.

All this sounds like many of us. The latter part is not meant to be critical; it's just honest. Nicodemus' faith, like ours, is fine as far as it goes, it just doesn't go far enough, but there is hope for him, as well as an example for us. In him we see qualities that are helpful for all who seek an ever-maturing faith.

One helpful quality Nicodemus possesses is a genuine and passionate yearning to know more about life and faith. He is a leader of a key group within first-century Judaism, the Pharisees. They are not all self-interested, politically motivated people opposed to Jesus, as much of the Christian Testament seems to indicate. They are reformers of the law and faith, and this reformer has been intrigued by something Jesus has said or done, so much so that he finds a way to meet with him.

It happens at night, we don't know for sure why. It may be simply a desire to have an uninterrupted conversation. Some rabbinic teaching takes place in the evening. But it may also be an effort to hide the meeting. Nicodemus may not yet be ready to let anyone else know of his interest in Jesus. Some of his colleagues are opposed to him.

Whatever the reason, Nicodemus seeks him out and thus reveals not only an interest in Jesus but also a willingness to learn more, as well as an acknowledgement that he does not know it all. It is remarkable humility for a religious leader but also a key ingredient of maturing faith. Those who think they know it all rarely learn anything new.

We might think everyone comes to church with a genuine yearning to learn more. If only they did... People come to church for many different reasons, not all of them beginning with Jesus. People also come with varying degrees of understanding and even a desire to understand, much less change their lives. And many exhibit behavior that seems to indicate that they think they have nothing more to learn.

For example, many adults drop out of Sunday School, Worship, or church as whole when their children grow up, as if the only reason to attend was to make sure the kids got some basics. There was nothing left for them to learn. To be fair, sometimes established approaches to education are dated and need innovation, and this church is working on such innovation, but learning depends on a desire to learn as much as any methodology, and we always have more to learn.

But while some drop out, others continue to come but only to demonstrate that they know it all, which is usually reduced to a few credal basics like the nature of the Trinity, the doctrine of salvation, and the divinity of Jesus, or perhaps a few ethical stances - the right ones, of course! God and faith fit into neat little boxes, and any suggestion that there might be more is not only unnecessary but also dangerous. Yet the very idea of putting God in a box, thinking we know all there is to know, is unwise and self-defeating, if not blasphemous.

Kathleen Norris put it this way (*Amazing Grace*, p. 214). “One so often hears people say, ‘I just can’t handle it,’ when they reject a biblical image of God as Father, as Mother, as Lord or Judge; God as lover, as angry or jealous; God on a cross. I find this choice of words revealing, however real the pain they reflect: if we seek a God we can ‘handle,’ that will be exactly what we get. A God we can manipulate, suspiciously like ourselves, the wideness of whose mercy we have cut down to size.”

Deep down, none of us wants a God in a box, none of us benefits from cutting down to size the wideness of God’s mercy. Nicodemus doesn’t exhibit this kind of faith. He realizes there is more to learn, perhaps even from Jesus. We benefit from following his example.

Because of his desire to learn, Nicodemus also reveals a willingness to ask questions, even those that may make him appear silly.

When Jesus says no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, Nicodemus asks, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” The concept doesn’t make sense to him, as it wouldn’t to anyone at first. So, he expresses his thoughts in the form of a question, silly sounding but honest. Pretending that we understand or agree when we do not leaves us in the dark and gives others a false impression.

But the truth is even when Jesus explains to Nicodemus what he means, he doesn’t understand. Jesus talks about being born of the Spirit, and the Spirit being like the wind in that, even though we can hear it, we don’t know where it comes from or where it goes. “How can these things be?” says Nicodemus, and Jesus wonders how he can be a teacher of Isarel and not understand. But do we understand, fully, to this day?

This is one of the most familiar and beloved passages of scripture, especially for evangelicals who underscore the calling to be born again, as well as the assurance of God’s love in John 3:16. But the calling to be born again is not as simple as it is often portrayed. The Greek *anōthen* can be translated “from above” or “anew” but ultimately Jesus means by the Spirit, not a physical birth. But what does that mean? Jesus says the Spirit works like the wind, we sense the Spirit’s presence, but we can’t nail it down. It is mysterious, ever more than we can grasp. Thus, questions, skepticism and doubt, a desire for clarity, are in order.

It is, of course, helpful to settle some things in our minds, as a friend in another setting knew. Joe was a deep thinker who studied with a Russian philosopher. He had been in our church for a long time, mostly attending a Sunday School class that embraced him and his questions, but he remained agnostic. He often launched into lectures on things like *the multiple “I”s*, and the class stayed with him, but when I announced that I was leaving, he said he wanted me to baptize him.

I talked with him and got the sense that he was ready to affirm the essence of faith. He still had some questions, but so did I, so do I. On the morning of his baptism, we went over the details, but he said that when I asked him if he confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior, he was going to give his lecture on *the multiple “I”s*. I said, “Joe, I’m younger than you (he was in his early 80s), I’m bigger and stronger, and I will be

holding you under water. You are going to say ‘Yes.’” With a knowing smirk, he said, “OK,” confirming what I knew all along, he was kidding. He had finally made peace with the essence of our faith.

There is a time to settle on some key things, but creating space for questions is healthy, and it can lead to deeper faith, as it did for my friend. It’s one of the best things about this church, the freedom it gives people to ask honest questions. May we never lose this quality!

One other important quality Nicodemus possesses is a willingness to stick with it. The story doesn’t end with a neat resolution, Nicodemus claiming faith. After wondering how Nicodemus could be a teacher of Israel, Jesus talks about being lifted up, as on a cross, or perhaps John does. In either case, we leave Nicodemus in confusion.

But this is not the end of his story. Nicodemus shows up two more times in this Gospel. In John 7, when Jesus gets into trouble in the temple, Nicodemus comes to his defense, saying, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it (vv. 45-52)?” Then, in John 19, Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea care for Jesus’ body by bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes (v. 39). A man who asks questions of interest under the cover of darkness first voices public support and then takes risky action.

Nicodemus struggles to embrace Jesus, he asks questions and has doubts, but he doesn’t give up his search for greater understanding, he sticks with it, and because he does, he becomes a follower of some kind.

So might we stick with it. We may have unanswered questions, we may need to act on our faith more and quit playing it safe, but faith is a journey. The key is to stick with it. The most important part of working with children, which Lynn and this church’s children’s ministry get, is that they have good experiences and want to come back. The content matters, but not as much as children developing a desire to learn throughout their lives because this is what following Jesus involves, this is what benefits them most in the long run. It’s what benefits us all.

If we are looking for models of faith, we can do a lot worse than Nicodemus. Genuine interest, honesty, and perseverance go a long way.