

“... all of us are like Nicodemus most of the time. When we find ourselves in distress, and when we seek guidance, we think we want to change. In fact, we want to remain the same, but to feel better about it. In psychological terms, we want to be more effective neurotics. We prefer the security of known misery to the misery of unfamiliar insecurity.” (*Sermons from Riverside, 1987*)

I wish I could say I wrote that, but I didn't. William Sloane Coffin did when he was the senior minister of Riverside Church in New York. The minute I read it, I realized how much I could relate to it, so I decided I would share it with you. I also realized how well it related to today's lessons, so my temptation was to read it twice!

We hit the jackpot this morning with two of scriptures more interesting characters. Abram, not yet renamed Abraham; and Nicodemus, whom God chose not to rename. Both of these men relate to Mr. Coffin's statement, but in very different ways. One proves it; the other does not. One you would think would not be open to change, but is. The other appears to be open to change, but may not really be. So let's look at each of them.

First, we have Abram. Abram lives in Ur of the Chaldeans with his wife Sarai, not yet renamed Sarah. Abram picks up his household to move to the land of Canaan, but for our purposes this morning that doesn't mean much because the motivation behind this journey was neither God's nor Abram's but, rather, Abram's father. We are not, by the way, ever told that Abram and Sarai are in any sense “religious” or if they believe in anything at all. All we are told is that they never make it to Canaan on the first try, but settle in Haran, somewhere in present day Syria. It is possible that Abram's father died there and they simply nested where they were at the time.

One day this totally undistinguished seventy-five year old man, living in this village dedicated to the moon god, is addressed by some disembodied voice which tells him that it is time to scoop up his wife and nephew, and make the rest of the trip to Canaan. The voice also tells him that life will change dramatically for them. In their old age, and after many years of coming to terms with the truth of Sarai's barrenness, they will not only become parents of a child, but of an entire blessed **nation** of children.

I would love to have joined Abram and Sarai for pillow talk that night. “What do you mean a voice told you, Abram? You expect me to pick up and move again with this killer arthritis because you're hearing voices?” “I'm telling you Sarai, it was so real, and so sincere. I just have this feeling. It promised us a son, a son, Sarai.” “I'm pushing eighty here, Abram. But alright, alright. But this really **is** the last time.”

While we enjoy hearing this story, if Abram was a friend of ours we would consider him to be entering senility. Regardless, there seems to be an openness in Abram; an openness that understands there is something more to life, something better; and he is willing to change his entire life, along with that of his family and household, with nothing in writing and no guarantees, and based solely on the possibility that the promise of an unknown voice which refuses to show itself, just might be true.

Now let's go back to the future, to the same area of the world a few thousand years later, a short time in God's scheme of things. It is the middle of the night, when all the citizenry are tucked safely in their beds. All, that is, except for one. He has insomnia. Something is not right. Nicodemus has followed his life plan and ended up at his goal. He has the right family pedigree, the right education, more power and money than any one man could want. He knows the Torah and all 613 precepts that come from it by heart, and he could probably tell you every word that has come from the mouth of God since Abraham. Nicodemus is a member of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Council of Judaism; there is nothing beyond that to reach for. To get where he is, Nicodemus must be somewhere up in age, for that is how long it takes to get to the top.

But Nicodemus has become restless. He wants to know if what he has is all there is. And he has heard things about this carpenter turned rabbi and prophet by the name of Jesus. He has heard about the miracles and healings and teachings. And he wonders if this man can tell him what he wants to know, even if he is not certain himself what that is. So Nicodemus does something which, in itself, is a huge risk. He goes out in the middle of the night, so as not to be detected, lest he lose his job and his reputation, and possibly his life for what he is about to do.... go in search of this most unusual rabbi who hangs around with society's disreputable, because Nicodemus cannot shake this feeling that Jesus knows something which he does not.

And here begins Nicodemus' education about the things of life he has very little idea even exist. He finds Jesus, who is willing to speak with him at this ungodly hour, but asks Jesus no question; he simply makes a 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." And Jesus, as is his way, knows Nicodemus' question even if Nicodemus does not, and proceeds to answer him. "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Now there seems to be a little confusion here about whether Nicodemus hears Jesus say "born from above" or "born again," as the word in Greek is the same. Hence, Nicodemus' response about entering again into the mother's womb. In reality, of course, it doesn't matter. Whether "above" or "again," Nicodemus doesn't get it.

Remember, Nicodemus knows facts and figures. He knows the Torah and he knows the 613 precepts of the Law. He knows rules and regulations. Nicodemus might have studied accounting and statistics, along with memorizing his catechism. For Nicodemus, faith comes by arguments and proofs. Nicodemus takes the words of Jesus literally, because he is a literal man. If Jesus says you must be born from above or born again, Nicodemus wants to know how one can climb back into their mother's womb. Nicodemus wants Jesus to tell him how to know God better. But he doesn't want any change in his life. He just wants to know the steps; he wants to know what he can study; he wants the "how to" manual: "A Real Relationship With God.... For Dummies."

Fortunately.... for all of us.... Jesus is a patient man, and no doubt grateful that Nicodemus is there asking questions at all. But he is going to have to explain to Nicodemus that what he is really asking for is going to require a change.... in his life and in him. But Nicodemus didn't come to Jesus with that in mind. He came to add to his already extensive knowledge

about God and, in that, find satisfaction in his life. In the way William Sloane Coffin might have said it, Nicodemus would prefer the security of known wretchedness to the wretchedness of unfamiliar insecurity. And what Jesus is about to offer Nicodemus has a huge amount of insecurity attached to it. “You cannot balance the books when it comes to God,” Jesus tells him. “You cannot pin God down, control him, or generally figure out what he is going to do in the future by what he has done in the past. Doctrines, dogmas, rituals and prayer books are helpful, but they will never stop the Spirit from blowing where the Spirit will blow.... and if you choose to live in that Spirit, Nicodemus, (which is really what you **are** looking for) you will not know from one minute to the next where that Spirit will lift you up and take you; so if its security you’re looking for, you’re definitely barking up the wrong tree.” It reminds me of the quote I once read: “God made us in his image and likeness and we’ve been returning the favor ever since.”

I’ll say it again (it seems to have become my mantra for Lent). It is not about **us** or what **we** do. It is about **God** and what **God** does. But control is probably the hardest thing for any of us to give up. To trust God is probably the hardest thing for any of us to take on. I like security. I like to be able to see it and touch it. I like to know what is going to happen tomorrow, either because I have planned it or because I have the experience of it having happened yesterday. I get along well with God when he agrees with me; and, if he doesn’t, I would really rather not know about it. And so there are times when God and I have an understanding.... but we have very little that can be called a real relationship. And I have a feeling I am not alone.

Nicodemus wanted to know why he wasn’t happy even though he had it all. Whether he understood it or not, he wanted to know what life was really about. He wanted to know if God was a living, active being that could tell him apart from everyone else. He wanted to find some semblance of peace. And he tried to find the answers to these questions the way he was taught to do. But it wasn’t working. He wasn’t truly aware of a living spiritual reality in his life. So Jesus told him he had to loosen his grip on this world and its concerns, so that he could perceive the things of God going on around him. Jesus told him he had to loosen his grip on this world and its concerns, so that his muscles would relax enough for his body to be easily picked up by the wind of God. He needed to be born of the wind. All he had to do was take a closer look at Father Abraham. All he had to do was let himself fall into the hands of the living God and trust that the love of that God, which breathed life into him so long ago, would take him places he hadn’t even imagined. And Nicodemus went home to think about it.

What did Nicodemus decide? We aren’t told. But we are told that later on when the Pharisees are conspiring to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus is the one who stands up in Jesus’ defense. And it was Nicodemus who brought the spices to anoint Jesus’ body after the crucifixion and helped Joseph of Arimathea carry the body to the tomb. Maybe the wind of the Spirit was blowing Nicodemus toward true faith and discipleship. And if it can happen for Nicodemus, maybe it can happen for us.

Genesis 12:1-8; John 3:1-17
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