

“Overcoming the Fear of Change”

John 3:1-5, 19:38-39; Luke 18:18-23

Our fears come in many shapes and sizes. At times, it can be hard even to know exactly what it is that makes us so anxious. Today, we consider the stories of two men who were confronted by a change they could hardly comprehend. One, so I'd like to think, pushed through his fear and embraced the change, albeit reluctantly. The other simply turned away in sadness.



In the night

Nicodemus was a Pharisee¹ and a leader of the Jews. An important man. A man with much to protect. He had heard the strange story of how a man from Nazareth, named Jesus, had changed water into wine during a large wedding party in Cana (John 2:1-12). And Nicodemus knew that Jesus was the cousin of that wild man, John, who had been baptizing people out at the Jordan River. But Nicodemus' world had been rocked during the most recent Passover Festival in Jerusalem. There, this Jesus from Nazareth had charged into the temple courtyards one morning, turning over tables and generally disrupting the sacrificial industry² for a short while (John 2:13-22). In the days following, Jesus had astounded people with healings and other miracles. He had taught with an authority beyond that even claimed by the Pharisees. “Who is he?” the crowds asked. Nicodemus wondered himself. Feeling his heart strangely warmed and his mind perplexed, Nicodemus decided to approach Jesus, seeking some sort of explanation. But Nicodemus couldn't just walk up to him. He had a reputation to protect. Already, some of the Pharisees were talking about the need to confront Jesus. Fearing the consequences of a meeting with Jesus, Nicodemus took the safe route. He went to Jesus at night -- so no one would know.³

Nicodemus left his meeting with Jesus as perplexed and confused as when he arrived. Still, he wondered, what did Jesus really mean by, “You must be born from above.” Jesus had even seemed amazed that Nicodemus had not understood these things! Yet, Nicodemus was glad that he had overcome his fear and had asked for the meeting. Later, at a meeting of some Pharisees and temple priests, Nicodemus would stand to defend Jesus, urging that he be heard by the leaders before they judge him (John 7:50-52). And much later still, when it seemed that Jesus' entire ministry had come crashing down upon a Roman cross, Nicodemus would join Joseph of Arimathea in caring for Jesus' body. In a lavish expression of devotion, Nicodemus would bring a large quantity of expensive incense and perfume to anoint Jesus' body (John 19:38-39).

We meet Nicodemus only three times in John's Gospel. He is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. We can't know whether Nicodemus would have considered himself a follower of Jesus before the crucifixion. And we can't know whether he was counted among the believers after Jesus' resurrection. But we do know that Nicodemus was deeply affected by his encounter with Jesus. He could have easily been overcome by his

¹ The Pharisees were an important group of Jews for nearly two centuries before the destruction of the temple in 70AD. The Pharisees were committed to the careful keeping of God's Law and waited, with great anticipation, for the coming of the Messiah, God's kingdom, and the bodily resurrection of the dead. In their religious lives, some Pharisees followed a path of piety while others pursued political, even revolutionary, agendas.

² The temple in Jerusalem was the centerpiece of the Jewish religion. During Passover, the great celebration of liberty and salvation, the temple and its courtyards were turned into a charnel house as thousands of Jews came to purchase animals that would then be slaughtered by the temple priests in sacrificial rituals.

³ Obviously, I'm using a little informed imagination to flesh out the portrait of Nicodemus.

gods too small

Last week, I mentioned J.B. Phillips' book, *Your God Is Too Small*. He wants us to see that often our "god" is simply too small to enable us to overcome the fears and anxieties of life. Here is one example of a too small god. *Resident Policeman* – For some people, the closest they ever get to God is their own conscience, imagining that the small voice telling them right from wrong is God's voice. But, of course, it is not. Our consciences are our moral sense, and, like our other senses, our moral sense can be trained well or poorly. When our moral sense is trained by the commonsensical street smarts of this world, our moral sense ends up twisted. We may hear our conscience, but it is unable to guide us in what is truly right and wrong. We might even end up concluding that there is no right or wrong, but only opinion. Instead, our moral sense must be informed by the God who made us, who is revealed in Jesus and in the pages of Scripture read by the believing community. When we allow our conscience and our heart to be shaped by the God-Who-Is, we hear not the "feeble voice of the half-blind thing we call a conscience," but the voice of God.

fears, refusing to approach Jesus even at night. But Nicodemus pressed on, open to the notion of a God much larger and very different from the God he had known.

Fear and sadness

In our second story today, we meet another important man. He is both wealthy and powerful. Like Nicodemus, he will be confronted by a God larger than he ever imagined. But unlike Nicodemus, he will simply turn away, unable to overcome his fear.

We don't know why this important man asks the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Perhaps he is sincere. Perhaps he is simply looking for an endorsement. Regardless, he gets the question wrong. One does not "do" anything to "inherit." Either the man wasn't paying attention or had stepped away when Jesus taught that we are to receive the kingdom like children (Luke 18:15-17, the verses immediately preceding this story). Like children? There is no place here for merit or achievement. The inheritance is a gift which cannot be earned.

Nonetheless, Jesus lets the man go ahead with his "doing" reminding him that he knows the Law – no adultery, no murder, no theft, honor your parents, etc. The man believes that he has "done" all this. Surely, the man is feeling pretty good about himself at this point, eternal life is in his grasp! But then Jesus asks him to "do" one more thing: sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus. Luke tells us only that the man "became sad, for he was very rich."

What a change Jesus asks of this man. Sell all that he has! Surely Jesus can't mean what he says. What about the man's financial independence? His financial security? Jesus promises the man a large bank account in heaven, but what about his earthly portfolio?

Yes, this is a story about our attachment to possessions and our imagined independence. But it is also a story about trust. The man trusts what he can put his hands on, namely his money. He professes to trust God, but it is a timid trust, a trust that is unable to sustain him when he faces the challenge posed to him by Jesus. The change Jesus demands is simply too much for him. Jesus has exposed the man to be a person of little faith – or at least little faith in God, for he seems to

have much faith in his possessions. In essence, the man is an idolater. He has chosen to trust in his wealth rather than in God.

It is our faith in, our trust of, the LORD God that sustains us through the fears and anxieties of our lives.

To you, O Lord, I lift my soul.

O my God, in you I trust. (from Psalm 25)