

March 5, 2023

Seventh Sunday of Lent

“Reclaim: Seeing the Potential”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: John 3:1-17

There’s a lot for us to joyfully claim in this passage: good news of God’s love; the wonder of a renewed life; and the opportunity within all of us to become disciples. Nicodemus’s listening and his questions help us to see all of it. Though Nicodemus faded out of this conversation, that’s not the last we hear of him. He popped up again in chapter 7, when the authorities were arguing about who Jesus was and whether they should arrest him. Nicodemus didn’t defend Jesus, but he confirmed out loud that the law gave people a fair hearing before judging them. And it should do the same for Jesus. That was certainly not an endorsement of Jesus, but it gave him more credence than any of the other authorities were.

Then, at the very end of John’s story, after Jesus was crucified, there was Nicodemus again. After Jesus’ body was removed from the cross, Nicodemus came with spices to anoint the body for burial. He brought nearly 100 pounds of myrrh and aloe. It was an enormous amount; an abundance. Such an amount demonstrates how much he wanted to anoint Jesus’ body, to care for him and show his love. Death often clarifies things in our minds. Perhaps Jesus’ death did that for Nicodemus. Perhaps in that moment, his curiosity about Jesus became something more serious; more meaningful; more devoted. Something closer to discipleship.

Nicodemus did not get everything right when first came at night to speak with Jesus. But rather than ridiculing him for not understanding, let’s reclaim his potential for discipleship. A potential which very likely developed into something more, later on in his journey. A potential that lies within each of us, no matter where we are on our journey. No matter what has happened in our past, whether we’ve been on the straight and narrow or been on a twisting path; whether we are good listeners to Jesus or better at asking questions, there is always potential for us to be reborn from above. There is an opportunity for all of us to experience the transformation that happens by water and the spirit. Whether we like to come to Jesus in the dark of night or in the bright daylight, there is always potential for us to feel the abundance of God’s love in our lives. So let’s reclaim that potential and receive the gifts that God offers.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

Throughout the 1980s Rollen Stewart traveled 60,000 miles a year as a full-time sports spectator. He wore his signature rainbow wig and a shirt that said *John 3:16* on the front. He’d try to get a seat behind the goalposts at a football game or near home plate at baseball games. For a time, the cameras loved his antics, funny dances, and attention getting behavior.¹ For some who knew the reference, the Bible verse was a shorthand nod to the importance of God’s love. For those who didn’t, perhaps his appearance made them curious enough to look up the verse or ask a friend what it meant. For others, it made them embarrassed for their religion. Because of Stewart, most of us are now familiar with seeing John 3:16 signs on the screen at public events from basketball to car racing.

Which raises the question—were Stewart’s actions a way to spread the message of God’s love or was his bizarre understanding of theology a sign that he needed mental health support? Did he find success in sharing the good news or did he sully Christian faith? The legacy Stewart left is an ambiguous one.

The story in John’s gospel that inspired Stewart’s famous sign was a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus, too, left an ambiguous legacy. He was a Pharisee—a Jewish leader—most of whom were not interested in the ideas Jesus was sharing. He came to visit Jesus at night. In John’s gospel, nighttime and darkness function as symbols for unbelief. While light and daytime demonstrate belief in Jesus as the one who embodies the real presence of God. Nicodemus acknowledged that Jesus was “from God” but he never verbalized the real news: that Jesus was God. And he was too dense to pick up the clues Jesus was giving him to understand what it meant to be born anew. At the end of the story, Nicodemus’ character seems to disappear from the conversation. We don’t know when he exited the conversation or which of Jesus’ words of love he actually heard.

1 Jake Rossen, “The Unbelievable Life of the ‘John 3:16’ Sports Guy,” Mental Floss, August 18, 2017.

It's easy to dismiss Nicodemus, this visitor in the night. His character is not a clear picture of belief in Jesus. Jesus himself didn't go easy on Nicodemus, either. "Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" Jesus asked. But our theme this season is *reframing*. And our word for today is *reclaim*. So, can we see his story in a new light? Can we see something faithful in the ambiguity? Can we find some truth in Nicodemus' story that we've distanced ourselves from that today we can *re-claim*?

I suggest that we might reclaim Nicodemus' *potential* to be a disciple. We met him at the very beginning of his journey. He did come at night. He did have a lot of questions and not a lot of understanding. And yet he came with interest and curiosity. He stepped out of the box that he and his fellow Pharisees lived in to learn more about this daring rabbi named Jesus who was sharing God's teachings in a new way. Coming to Jesus was a risk. Imagine what the other Pharisees would have said if they had seen and heard him! Though his courage did not yet measure up to the kind of understanding and commitment Jesus hoped for, we have to give Nicodemus some credit for the bravery and interest he showed.

What we see in Nicodemus was the capacity to become a disciple. He had the makings of a follower of Jesus. Last week, we talked about *becoming followers* of Jesus, rather than admirers. The title of that sermon itself acknowledges that all of us are works in progress. Most of us have not yet arrived as perfectly faithful disciples who always understand Jesus fully. We, too, embody potential. So we cannot dismiss Nicodemus. Surely there is something we can learn from him.

First, Nicodemus was a good listener. He went to the source—Jesus—and listened to find out more. He didn't settle for rumors or second-hand stories; he wanted to know more, first-hand. The very first thing Jesus shared with Nicodemus was about being born from above. For some of us, that concept is another one we might need to reclaim. Jesus told Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom without being born from above. That word "above" in Greek can also be translated "again" or "anew." Born again, born from above, born anew. Nicodemus didn't understand what Jesus meant. Sometimes we don't either. There are some Christian traditions that have a very specific understanding of this term. They may even require some kind of powerful "born again" experience of feeling God in your life in order to call yourself a Christian. Being born again is not something Presbyterians spend a lot of time talking about. Largely because we believe God's grace comes to us first—before we know anything of it.

But if we lean in and try to reclaim what Jesus was talking about, it's actually a beautiful idea. To be born from above means a kind of renewal and rebirth that the Spirit offers to us. It's not something we strive for or try to achieve. Being born anew is letting God transform us so that we live differently; so that we can see God's presence where we didn't use to; so that we live for purposes other than just ourselves. Jesus said this kind of renewal happens by water and the Spirit. That might be in the waters of baptism, which God uses to claim us and seal us. It might also happen through the gift of Jesus in our lives, who is himself, living water. Jesus as the living water quenches our thirst for a more meaningful, more intentional kind of life. Finally, the gift of being born anew might come to us through the winds of the Spirit. The wind is that same Spirit that was breathed into the first humans; the very essence of God that animates and accompanies us. When God encounters us in baptism, in Christ, and by the Spirit, we are remade into God's own children. When we realize God is as close to us as our own breath, we are renewed. To be born from above is God's gift available to all people, not just certain kinds of Christians. All of us can claim, or even reclaim, the beauty and power of this experience when God offers it to us.

While he listened, Nicodemus also asked questions. Though he struggled to understand Jesus' metaphors, the questions he asked got Jesus talking so that he could learn more. In response, Jesus shared those famous words in chapter 3, verse 16. Some of us love those words outright. We say that verse sums up the whole gospel. For others, the verse makes us squirm. Maybe because it seems to exclude some people. Maybe because of behavior like Rollen Stewart's, who sometimes seemed to use the verse as a self-promotion campaign, rather than a profound statement of God's generous love. For those who struggle with this verse, today is another opportunity to reclaim it. Jesus said it as a declaration of good news. It was about saving life, honoring life, not taking it away. It was meant to affirm the gift of God's own self in Jesus. Jesus as the very embodiment of God is what John's gospel wants to paint for us in big, bold ink. You want to see God? Look at Jesus! You want to experience God's love? It's right here in the person of Jesus. That is the news - in a way that speaks of joy and celebration, as well as sacrifice, humility and love. The gospel is never meant as a threat. Jesus intended this good news for Nicodemus and for all those with the potential to come to faith. We get to hear it because of all those questions Nicodemus asked.