

"Justice from Within" - John 3:1-17

In our gospel lesson, Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees, comes to Jesus at night. He has some questions for Jesus about what Jesus is teaching. Jesus tells him he must be **"born again"**. Nicodemus can't quite understand the image of being born a second time - **"How can a man be born again?"** He and Jesus talk about being born from above. Jesus reminds him of God's tremendous love and grace for the world, culminating in the ever-popular John 3:16, **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life"**. But the story all starts with Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night.

Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus at night? Many different motives have been attributed to Nicodemus' nighttime visit. Some say he came at night because he was ashamed to be seen with this counter-cultural, anti-Pharisee leader.

Others say he was trying to **protect** Jesus, who might have been exposed if Nicodemus had come to him in the daytime.

Or maybe Nicodemus was just **trying to protect his own hide** by sneaking in to ask Jesus these questions under cover of darkness.

Still others say that the *night is a symbol of Nicodemus' spiritual state - he's "in the dark", so to speak*. Whatever his motives, the most interesting twist in the Nicodemus story comes several chapters after this gospel lesson.

Toward the end of John 7 (four chapters and several weeks or even months after today's gospel lesson), the temple police refused to arrest Jesus, much to the chagrin of the chief priests and Pharisees.

The religious leaders challenged the temple police, suggesting that the police had been duped by Jesus, who they considered to be on par with a snake oil salesman. **At that point, Nicodemus spoke on Jesus' behalf to the Pharisees, reminding them in John 7:51, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?"** Clearly, Nicodemus is still a Pharisee. He speaks as one of them. They respect him. His voice speaks with their own authority. **And while he does not boldly declare his allegiance to Jesus no matter what the consequences, he does work within the system to assist Jesus' cause.** Nicodemus speaks up in order to seek real justice for Jesus. He may believe that if the religious leaders would just give Jesus a fair hearing, they will find out that he's innocent.

**But think about the precarious situation Nicodemus is in. If the other Pharisees find out he has already met with Jesus, and they hear him speaking like this, he could be shunned and turned away from his religious community.**

If they believe that he has changed sides, they could turn against him and he would no longer have the same kind of access to this system of religious leaders. **If Nicodemus voiced his support of Jesus too strongly, he ran the risk of being seen as a Jesus-sympathizer, and as a Pharisee, that would virtually seal his fate as an outsider with no clout.** They might believe that he, too, had been duped by this snake oil salesman, Jesus.

Nicodemus stepped up to the plate when he spoke on Jesus behalf, albeit in an indirect way. Nicodemus worked within the Pharisaic system. Instead of tendering his resignation and telling everyone off, he decided to continue as a leader of the Jews. He realized that he can affect more change from the inside than he can from the outside.

There are many issues we face in our 21<sup>st</sup> century that can exasperate us. Many issues we really have any control over whatsoever. **But there are injustices that touch our hearts, a story of injustice that moves your soul. The need to speak out exists all around us. Voiceless people in unjust situations deserve our attention.** Many people in our world are hurting and oppressed, and we cannot just stand on the sidelines wondering what to do. We must get involved in some cause, in order to seek justice and compassion for our fellow human beings. If you don't have an opinion on these issues (or other issues of importance), make some time to get informed. Nicodemus' night visit with Jesus was really a way for him to get some answers he needed, in order to make an informed decision himself.

Then after you've begun to get informed, once you've done some initial self-education, like Nicodemus look around you. Explore the spheres of influence that you find yourself in. In February I attended a town planning meeting where various issues were discussed. One of the biggest issues that was discussed was the lack of information and aid in the times of disaster, hurricanes or even just cold weather. How can we stay

informed on a local level? How can we meet the needs of those less fortunate that we are right here in our own back yard. All it takes is a desire to bring change. A desire to try something new. A desire to reach beyond our comfort zones. It doesn't always take more money or any money. All it takes is communication and a desire to bring about change.

Evaluate the circles you travel in. Look at the systems you participate in. Perhaps it's talking to your closest friends and raising the issues with them. Or maybe you can have some effect on a politician by organizing a letter writing campaign. Politicians listen when enough people speak out like Nicodemus did. Engage yourself in the fight for justice on behalf of other people who God created.

**Unfortunately, in spite of Nicodemus' protests, Jesus still did not receive a "fair" trial. He did not get the proper hearing that Nicodemus was fighting for. But perhaps Nicodemus' voice gave someone else courage to speak some other time.** Or maybe it encouraged one of Jesus' opponents to have a little more compassion for Jesus as a human being. At the very least, Nicodemus' voice meant enough to someone that it made it in the retelling of the biblical story of these events. Acts of courage, carried out in love, can go a long way, even in a system that seems so dis-couraging.

Look at your own life. What changes can you affect in our world? What people with needs are out there, waiting for a just solution that you might be able to provide or support? Who is seeking God's justice in our world? Micah 6:8bc says, **"What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"** Let's learn from Nicodemus, who stood up within the system to try to seek justice for Jesus. Then from his witness, we can do the same for Jesus' hurting children in this hurting world. You can make a difference on God's behalf. Nicodemus sought justice for Jesus even as he worked for change within his system, and you can too. Amen.