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John 3:1-17 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus^[a] by night and said to him, “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.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”^[b] ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you^[g] do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[i]

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 7:45-52 ⁴⁵ Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, “Why did you not arrest him?” ⁴⁶ The police answered, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” ⁴⁷ Then the Pharisees replied, “Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? ⁴⁸ Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? ⁴⁹ But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed.” ⁵⁰ Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, ⁵¹ “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” ⁵² They replied, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.”

John 19:38-42 ³⁸ After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹ Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰ They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

What Rob just shared from the Gospel of John is actually an expansion of the lectionary Gospel reading, which was the first reading from Chapter 3. And that first reading from John, as you heard, offers many, many, many, many sermons...and lots of theological consideration and conversation. But when I read that reading, the first thing my attention went to was Nicodemus., What a great question he asked: “How can anyone be born after growing old?” Who was this man who asked Jesus this question and what is said about him in the texts? And what was the answer? So I dug deeper, adding two additional readings from the Gospel of John which you also just heard.

My first question about Nicodemus was directed at Rabbi Amy from OZ – oh, wise woman I think she is – and she shared that the Jewish sources are conflicted about who Nicodemus was. Some believe that he was the Talmudic Nakdimon -- a wealthy and well regarded member of the Sanhedrin.” Which is what the Christian scriptures allude to. But she shared “I am not sure” So much for that! ☺ The Sanhedrin was an elite group up to 71 male members who basically had the final word as to how Judaism was to be practiced in Israel; they were gatekeepers of the law. According to this Gospel, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which is defined basically as a “lawyer” among the Sanhedrins, an “expert” on Jewish law, including the rules on Jewish religious ceremonies and practices. “Pharisee rules” adhered to oral laws and traditions, and they believed in an afterlife and the coming of a Messiah. So, according to the Gospel of John, Nicodemus may not have been just a strict follower of Jewish law, ceremonies, and

practices. He may also have been a member of an elite group of authorities who defined what Judaism looked like and meant.

The author of John writes, as you heard, that Nicodemus came to Jesus in the night. Now, scholars question the plausibility of such a scene, after dark, because it's known that Jewish leaders were quite open about challenging Jesus and his mission, ministry, and teachings in broad daylight.

The New Interpreter's Bible (p 548) offers that "coming in the night" is symbolic of separation from God. In my studies of the Gospel of John, I understand Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the night as a nuance for this particular gospel. Seeing was very important to the author of this gospel to his audience in the process of conveying the stories of his time. This Gospel was believed to have been written @ 90-100 CE, so it was a time when few who had actually witnessed Jesus' ministry were still alive. A real purpose of this gospel – frankly, any gospel – is to connect those in the present with those in their past. Nicodemus coming in the night is more likely a metaphor for Nicodemus not being able to see who Jesus really was, what Jesus was all about at that moment in time. Since the light of Christian faith was not yet seen by Nicodemus this may be seen as a symbol of separation from God.

I can only imagine that what Nicodemus heard from Jesus blew his mind. How many of *us* really understand, really get that message? About being born again, and the power of the Spirit in this process. Would we choose this difficult rebirth if it were solely left up to us? And consider the analogy of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness, Jesus being lifted up via the Cross..... the acknowledgement from Jesus that he will die with a recognition that this self-sacrifice is God's hope to save the world. His death is a rebirth. The scripture doesn't say that the world *will* be saved through this rebirth, it says that "the world *might* be saved." Might be saved. God never does give up on us.

Chapter 3 of John speaks to the time when Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, and then again in Chapter 7, we find Jesus back in Jerusalem for the Passover festival having come to and from Galilee. He is upsetting the status quo, and it seems he may know it. Maybe Jesus

is pushing the envelope of tolerance as he makes his presence known – in Chapter 7, it becomes clear that the heat is being turned up, as we can tell from this declaration: (vs 37) “On the last day of the festival Jesus cried out ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and let the one who believes in me drink.’” And later in this chapter, the crowd was divided... “So there was a division in the crowd because of him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.” (vs 43-44)

In the midst of the social and political conflict surrounding Jesus’ ministry and teachings, Nicodemus comes back into the story – and in a very public setting where he challenges his own profession -- the status quo of Jewish tradition, Jewish law, and his colleagues and partners in their interpretation and application of the law. Nicodemus speaks out and says, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it? (vs 51) Thus, Nicodemus, who comes out of the dark, brings the light needed to speak truth to power. The response – his colleagues in power, their response is to distance themselves from Nicodemus – they question his citizenship: “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?” (Vs 52) In a pious devaluation of the authority of both Nicodemus and Jesus, the words in the text continue: “Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.”

Nicodemus’ support for just law, and for Jesus, is devalued simply by devaluing Nicodemus. How often in history have we seen and do we see the devaluing and even dehumanization of a person or groups of people in order to silence their people to do justice or to live in justice.

In our third John reading, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea, member of the Sanhedrin, has far more wealth and privilege than Nicodemus. He was able to buy the land and the tomb needed for this burial.

Nicodemus, on the other hand, was focused on procuring the myrrh and aloes required by Jewish burial rites. Not the necessities, but the honors.* The washings and the anointings. The focus this death so required. The love.

Because of their purchases, we know that both Joseph and Nicodemus have anticipated this burial. One scholastic article suggests that due to Joseph’s standing in the community, Pilate’s

wish was carried out: the burial of Jesus's body occurred discreetly so as not to incite the Jews during Passover. For leaving Jesus hanging on the cross, as criminals often were, would not be legal at this time, nor in the government's best interests.¹ This is supported by John 19:31 "Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the Sabbath, especially because that Sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate..... to remove the bodies." In today's scripture we learn that Joseph of Arimathea is really a secret disciple, stepping outside of *his* comfort zone, letting go of fear in his desire to honor Jesus. Re-born with this spirit, he requests permission from Pilate to remove the body. Did Joseph contribute and sacrifice? Certainly. But for me there is something really special about Nicodemus' offerings. He brought an enormous amount of myrrh and aloes about 100 pounds. This quantity of ointment for burial is true evidence, I think, of a genuine offering of love.²

The story of Nicodemus in the Gospel of John is a "love story." Like all good love stories there are forces working to prevent knowledge of such love as being possible. The planning of Jesus' burial, if planning happened, was most likely done by two people in the know; two people who were actually part of the inner circle seeking to kill Jesus. These two were, obviously, Joseph and Nicodemus. The idealistic progressive in me still wails -- if they knew, if they knew this was plan why didn't they stop Jesus from being killed? They should have done something to prevent the crucifixion. And I still cry -- but I have lived long enough to know that what my want is, is unrealistic and unattainable. It is of the flesh and not of the Spirit. Jesus, himself, tells Nicodemus that his lot is to die for the sake of humanity; "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." And so it was. And so he was. Upon the Cross. I do believe the Cross on which Jesus died, which is known as the symbol of Christianity is, as Mark Heim has written, a symbol for what never should have happened. And it is a reminder every time I see it of injustice and injustice that we must not accept.

¹ http://craigaeavans.com/Burial_Traditions.pdf

² Elliott's Commentary for English Readers <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/john/19-39.htm>

Nicodemus' *began* his faith quest by going directly to the source -- to Jesus. In the night, in the darkness, with his confidence that Jesus was a teacher from God, he came with one question "How?" How can anyone be born after having grown old? How can these things be? Jesus explained that to see the kingdom of God, one must be born of water and spirit. It is not about flesh. It is beyond that. It is about love. It is about who washes us in love, who sacrifices to make pure. It is about honoring. It is how we are moved by the Spirit to live as children of God, and as a child of God that allows us to see and to be in and to work for the kingdom of God. Beyond what's absolutely necessary. Beyond that, as Nicodemus surely knew, there is true love.

Nicodemus' story shares how challenging and difficult that can be in a hostile world. And it also tells a wonderful love story. A story of love for Jesus that grows from quiet and intimate conversations, questions of Jesus, to questioning in the public square the "holders of the law," if you will, and challenging their injustice in accusing and convicting Jesus to death without trial. And then to preparing Jesus' body and assisting Joseph of Arimathea with the burial out of respect for dignity, acknowledgement of God's grace, and all motivated by love.

In the time of Jesus, "as soon as a person was dead, his eyes were to be closed, he was to be kissed with love, and his body was to be washed (Genesis 50:1; Acts 9:37). In this washing, the body was anointed with perfumes. Nard was the most usual of these, but myrrh and aloes were also used."³

Nicodemus felt close enough to Jesus, loved Jesus enough, and I feel loved by Jesus enough, to offer an extravagant amount of myrrh and aloes, wrapping his body with spice and in linen. A sacred event, and one that offers a vision of separation from the physical world of rules and law and expectations to the spiritual world of love and faith.

For me, today's readings challenge and call us to begin to ask the question of how. How do we make sense of it all? How do we become receivers of such love, and how do we offer hope, faith in that love? I do believe it is both personal and communal. As we grow in faith by

³ <http://blog.adw.org/2014/08/what-were-the-rituals-associated-with-death-and-burial-in-jesus-day/>

asking questions and sharing our doubts, we then will not only be willing but, I believe, we will recognize the necessity to challenge the powers that do exist in our world that work to separate us from God and from one another.

Asking the questions is a first step on what can be a long and lonely journey. It opens us up to being isolated and ostracized in the flesh, and, ironically, this same isolation offers the spiritual freedom and opportunity to offer hope, love, faith and justice in this world. This, I believe, is the crux of what being born of the spirit is all about.

From John 3: 19-21 – “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done by God.”

I follow with a reading by Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Jerusalem*, entitled “A Gate Called Truth”. Just outside Jerusalem, we came to a gate called Truth. We call to the gatekeeper to let us in. “The latch is not on,” he replied. “Anyone who will, can enter.” We went closer, but seeing how great and how heavy was the gate, we looked for a way around. There must be a way around.” (p 68)

Let us personally and communally be willing and able to enter the gate of Truth by way of an illuminating light – a light that offers freedom from fear rooted in a faith in God, understanding in our seeking, trust in our doubting; new life in our living, and a love that surpasses all understanding. Let us, like Nicodemus, born anew by way of amazing grace and evolving faith, have a love story to share, that we share. Amen.

*As someone who is not educated in Jewish customs with burials, I regret my statement that the burial is a necessity and the myrrh, aloes and wrapping of the body are honors. It is my sense, and my experience that all extensions of caring for one another in life and death matter.... It is my hope that my later sharing that it is the extravagance with which Nicodemus offered the

myrrh and aloes that offers extravagant love. In no way to I intent to minimize the gifts of Joseph of Arimathea; my focus was on the continued inclusion of Nicodemus in the story of Jesus' ministry and death.