

A Striking Contrast!

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT
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John 3:1-17-Nicodemus

John 4:1-42-The Samaritan Woman

John places the lessons of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman side-by-side in his Gospel. In doing so, we see a striking contrast between these two characters. And yet, both of them travel on faith journeys that are transformed by their encounter with Jesus.

We begin with Nicodemus, which takes place in Jerusalem. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish elite, and a teacher. He is well known in the community. His faith journey is one of a devout Jew. He comes to Jesus in the dark of night, stealthily, quietly, secretly as though he doesn't want anyone to know. He is curious about Jesus, who has been performing signs. At the same time, he finds something unsettling and compelling about Jesus. So, he goes to Jesus uncertain and hesitant. With an air of confidence, he addresses Jesus as Rabbi and exclaims, "*You must have come from God because no one can do what you do unless God is with you.*"

Now, Nicodemus is not ignorant, nor is he closed-minded. He is thoughtful and serious. Pharisaic tradition was not intellectual rigidity. Instead, it was vigorous conversation, argument for the sake of faithfulness. They believed that truth was pursued through debate. Jesus' reply to Nicodemus is cryptic. "*No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*" Nicodemus doesn't understand what Jesus means. He takes Jesus' comment quite literally rather than metaphorically. Attempting to control the conversation he says, "*How can anyone be born after having grown old? One cannot return to their mother's womb and be born again.*" But Jesus persists, "*One must be born again to enter the kingdom of God.*" How can this be? Nicodemus muses. If Jesus is correct, then I'm going to have to change some of my theological understandings. Essentially Jesus is telling me to allow the Spirit to work in my life and reorient my thinking.

Finally, Jesus finds some common ground by making a reference to Moses who lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. Then alluding to himself he says, "*The Son of Man must be lifted up. Believe in him. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.*" Does Nicodemus believe what Jesus is telling him? Does he see Jesus as the Son of God, come into the world to save the world? We don't know. But I believe it reorients his thinking and expands his faith journey because Nicodemus shows up defending Jesus when the

Pharisees want to have Jesus arrested without a trial. Later on, he shows up again after Jesus' crucifixion bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes. He helps Joseph of Arimathea wrap Jesus' body in spices and place him in a tomb.

In contrast to Nicodemus is the story of the Samaritan woman, a strikingly different story. Jesus leaves Judea and travels to Galilee by way of Samaria. The theological point John makes is that Jesus is not only for the Jews. He is for all the world and its people, including the Samaritans.

When Jesus reaches Sychar, he is hot, tired, and thirsty. It is noontime. So he sits down by a well. He is approached by a Samaritan woman, who is holding a water jar. At first glance, this woman could not be more different from Nicodemus. She is an uneducated woman, a learner; he is educated and describes Jesus as a teacher of Israel. She is a Samaritan; he is a Jew. She is a nobody with a shameful past; he is a well-respected moral leader in his community, a somebody.

The Samaritan Woman is poor in a man's world, a stranger to Judaism, its practices, faith, conventional morality, and the good news Jesus brings. This unnamed woman comes alone, is unmarried, and is living with a man out of wedlock. She has had five husbands, but we don't know if the reason is due to tragedy, death, or divorce. So, there is striking contrast between Nicodemus and this Samaritan woman.

Instead of engaging Jesus with a need, Jesus speaks first to her conveying his need. Having no bucket to draw water, Jesus asks her for a drink of water. Surprised he would speak to her, she questions him. *"How is it that you ask me for a drink. We share nothing in common. Jewish men do not speak to Samaritan women. This just isn't right!"*

Jesus replies with a cryptic statement. *"If you knew who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water."* Taking him literally she says, *"How are you going to do that, you don't even have a bucket!"* Jesus patiently persists, *"Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. But, if you drink the water I give, you will never thirst again. It will become like a spring within you, gushing fountains of endless life."* She thinks this is pretty good and concedes. She says, *"Give me this water so I don't have to keep coming back to this well."*

Although she misunderstands Jesus, she shows a great desire for what he has to offer, even if it makes her question what she believes. When Jesus tells her something about her own sordid past, that she has said nothing about, she admits, *"You speak the truth, about me."* She recognizes him as a prophet. And then, Jesus reveals that he is the Messiah. Excited, she leaves her water jar and runs back to the city. *"Come and see"* she says to the people. They leave the city to investigate because of her testimony. Many come to believe that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

Although there is a stark difference between these two characters and their stories, the commonality is that they are both on faith journeys. Both are vulnerable. Both take risks. But Jesus does not turn away from either one of them. He engages them in conversation and takes them seriously. Nicodemus' faith journey becomes a gradual transformative progress from a cautious, intellectual seeker in the dark to a courageous, public follower of Jesus. The Samaritan Women's faith journey is a rapid transition from social isolation and skeptical questions to becoming an enthusiastic evangelist. And Jesus meets them where they are at. He displays a tough mind and a tender heart with both.

To Nicodemus, Jesus is tougher. He is more impatient with him than the Samaritan woman. He chastises and expects more from Nicodemus. After all, he is Pharisee and yet he doesn't understand.

With the Samaritan woman Jesus is tough in that he exposes her life story and brokenness. But he also knows she is a newcomer to faith, so he is tender with her. He willingly explains his metaphors. Jesus doesn't make fun of her, nor does he chastise her for her literal response to his metaphorical language. Instead, he nurtures her, nudges her along, like a parent teaching a young child.

Jesus can be confrontational and compassionate. He can be unyielding, and generous. But in both stories, we see the dramatic transformations of two people. They illustrate two very different kinds of faith journeys. Yet both require faith, trust, and transformation.

Jesus also supports each of us as we move toward him and grow in understanding, faith, and trust. He wants us to deepen and extend our faith, to recognize and acknowledge him for who he is and to follow him. We all come to trust at different rates of speed. We have different ways of thinking and understanding of what it means to trust God and to follow Jesus.

Perhaps being born from above is less about mastering new spiritual information and more about allowing God to soften our grip on the old. Lent is a season for repentance, which at its root means turning. Reorientation. Changing direction. Perhaps even changing our mind. Nicodemus shows us that such turning may begin in darkness, with defensiveness, and half-formed questions. But the Spirit is patient. The wind blows where it wills. And sometimes, the most faithful thing we can do is loosen our grip on certainty long enough for God to reshape it into deeper trust. Salvation is not merely a future promise. It is the presence of Jesus in our life now. God does not save us from outside our need. God meets us inside it.

And about that water jar the Samaritan Women leave behind. Perhaps we are the water jar that Jesus fills!

In Jesus' name, amen!