

**From Suffering to Salvation:  
The Darkness of Nicodemus**

Psalm 121; John 3:1-17

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The Second Sunday of Lent

By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor

Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

A Discovery Hour Class on Sunday evenings has been studying a book by Barbara Brown Taylor titled *Holy Envy*. It has generated robust discussion. The book is about a class Taylor taught at Piedmont College in north Georgia titled Religion 101. It was an introduction to the world's great religions. This was not a class to set up straw men just to knock them down. This was a class to dig deeply and understand, to experience, and to appreciate the religious traditions of the world. She spent five classes on each religion followed by a field trip. The field trips normally took them into Atlanta where they visited a service of the religion they had just studied. There they met the people, saw their practices, and even participated in some of their rituals

At first the students were a bit skeptical. One student wanted to know if she was going to teach them what was wrong with the other religions. If not, that student said, he didn't think he could stay in the class. He did eventually drop the class.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that as her own understanding of these religions grew something happened within her. She says she found more and more of the holy in those religions, things that resonated with her Christian experience, holy things she began to envy. She challenged her students to ask questions like these:

*What does it mean to be a person of faith in a world of many faiths?*

*If God is revealed in many ways, why follow the Christian way?*

*Is Christian faith primarily about being Christian or becoming truly human?*

*How does loving Jesus equip me to love those who do not love him the way I do?*

*What do religious strangers reveal to me about God? (Pp. 102-103)*

Here's what she writes:

*This is how far my holy envy has brought me: from fearing that Jesus will be mad at me for smelling other people's roses to trusting that Jesus is the Way that embraces all ways. Because there is only one of me, I can only walk one way at a time, but that does not prevent me from believing that other people might be walking their ways with equal devotion and good will. (p. 120)*

While that is not traditional Baptist teaching, many honest, thoughtful Baptists nevertheless have those questions, don't we? Most of us grew up in traditions that taught Christian exclusivity, the belief that the Church has all religious truth and the world's other religious traditions are wrong. They are in darkness, we were told. Then your daughter married a Jewish man. Then the new engineer who moved into the office next to you turned out to be a devout Buddhist. Then your Muslim next-door neighbor proved to be more devoutly Muslim than you were devoutly Christian.

Yes, I think many honest, thoughtful Christians raise these questions, but not in church, unless you go to Weatherly where it's okay. Most churches are not prepared for this discussion. It stretches us too much. It calls too much into question. So let's leave well enough alone, right?

Well enough is not good enough anymore. I want to say that it is okay to ask these questions, and it is okay to talk about them. It is okay to be stretched and call into question things we were taught as children. I want to offer my thoughts today, not because they're perfect because they're not. I offer them because I'm your pastor, and over twenty years ago I pledged to be honest with you. If you agree with me, that is fine. If

you don't agree with me, that is fine too. I hope we can learn from each other.

John tells us something very important about the man named Nicodemus in John 3: he was a religious man. He embraced the religion of Jesus, which was Judaism. John says Nicodemus was a Pharisee, one of the most respected and devout religious orders of Judaism. He says that Nicodemus was also a ruler of the Jews, probably an indication that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, their highest Jewish court. By every standard of their day, Nicodemus was a devoutly religious man.

However, John says that Nicodemus came to visit Jesus "by night."

Let me press the pause button here and remind you of something about the Gospel of John. Scholars have long noted that John is more theological than the other three gospels. His gospel often can be read on two levels, the literal level and the theological level. When John says that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, he was saying that it was nighttime. That is the literal meaning. On the theological level, he was saying that Nicodemus was in darkness, spiritual darkness.

But wasn't Nicodemus a deeply religious man? Wasn't he a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin? How could he be in spiritual darkness? Was it as simple as his religion was wrong? I don't think so because that was the religion of Jesus too, and he was clear that he did not come to abolish the law and the prophets.

I had to wrestle with some big questions this past week. I ask you to ponder them too:

*What does it mean to be in spiritual darkness? And conversely what does it mean to be in the light?*

*Are all Christians in the light? And conversely are all non-Christians in the dark?*

Here's the final question. I think it is the most important:

*Are people either completely in the dark or completely in the light, or can there be some darkness and some light in all of us?*

Do you remember what Jesus told Nicodemus? Jesus told him that he must be born from above, which Nicodemus didn't understand. So Jesus then explained to him that he must be born in two ways: by water and by Spirit. Some have argued that birth by water was a reference to baptism, but Christian baptism wasn't being practiced yet. Nicodemus would have known nothing of baptism. No, Jesus was referring to natural human birth here, which is literally out of a sack of water called amniotic fluid. Every person is born of water. Then comes the great challenge of life, to be born of Spirit, where we awaken to the Mystery that is God, become aware of the Holy Other, whom we cannot fully conceptualize, whom we cannot completely know, whom we cannot possess, but who loves all, accepts all, and who, I suggest, is known by many names. Being born of water is a moment in our lifetime. Being born of Spirit is a lifelong journey, a journey of unlearning childhood and childish notions of God, and then re-learning and experiencing the love and grace of the One whom all honest souls seek.

Most of us are some of both: some darkness and some light, like Nicodemus. So we practice our faith, Christian faith, in order to move from darkness into light, in order to be born from above, born of Spirit. That is why Christian faith gives us the season of Lent. Lent challenges us to look honestly at the darkness around and within us. May God help us.

#### Closing Prayer

Do help us, Lord. Help us to be honest, so honest that we are born from above. Amen.