

“How Do We Begin Again?”

John 3:1-17

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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In her book *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don't Belong To*, Lillian Daniels talks about realizing that she herself was often apologizing not only for the actions of other Christians today, but for the Inquisition, for the Salem witch trials, for wars and racism and imperialism, for every bad thing that had ever happened where a Christian sat at the decision making table.

Even as she abhorred these things, still she found herself apologizing for them. So, instead of continuing down that road, she decided to stop apologizing and to start talking about Christian community that matters and the importance of learning to talk about our journeys of faith.

I wonder if Nicodemus wasn't feeling some of the same pressure to apologize as Daniels was.

After all, he was a Jewish leader, a scholar, a pietist. He was one who was looked to by others, highly regarded. But I suspect he often found himself apologizing, too.

“I'm sorry that the addition of taxes by the Roman government makes the cost of you making your religious sacrifices so high.”

“I'm sorry that our religious leaders are cooperating with the Roman empire.”

“I'm sorry that you were judged by the letter of the law rather than its spirit.”

Here was Nicodemus, committed to his faith, deeply connected to his God and the people, but struggling because it seemed like things had gone awry. It seemed like all that anyone ever heard about was the corrupt priest who got paid under the table for being in cahoots with Rome or the ways that Jewish leaders and Roman officials were working together.

And surely Nicodemus was left wondering where his beloved faith had gone and how to hold up a light to show people the God who he knew.

So he came to see Jesus.

He came at night. And often we talk about that as if it was an act of shame, as if he did it under a shroud of darkness so no one would see him, no one would know. But I wonder if he didn't come at night because that was when Jesus had time, when people were making less demands...I wonder if it didn't make sense to come then because it

was a time when people could come to sit at the feet of the teachers and learn from them in peace.

After all, he had to know that Jesus had some of the same struggles that he did. In fact, it is just in the previous chapter that John, the gospel writer, tells the story of Jesus going into the temple and turning over the tables, making a mockery out of the corrupt marriage of religion and empire that had happened. Surely Nicodemus knew of this. Perhaps it inspired him to have this conversation.

See, we modern American Christians have taken this story out of that context and instead spiritualized it. We have tended to make it a conversion story, a story in which Nicodemus is coming to decide if wants to abandon his own religion for the one being offered by Jesus. And as children many of us memorized one particular verse - John 3:16 - and often learned alongside that verse that taking Jesus as our savior will secure our place in heaven.

But, let's put the brakes on here and remember that Jesus was a Jewish person who never left Judaism. Jesus was a Jewish teacher who didn't ask others to leave their faith, but invited them to remember its roots, to reform their faith from the inside out, to transform their living so that their faith reflected the heart and priorities of God. Jesus was a Jewish person who longed for the day when the kin-dom of God would be a reality and who worked in little ways each day of his life to help make that happen.

What Jesus invites Nicodemus to leave is not his Jewish faith, but the idea that the values of the earthly kingdoms reflect the values of God's heart.

What Jesus invites him to leave is not his commitment to his Jewish community, but the need to cow-tow to leaders who were giving in to the Roman empire and in doing so diluting their own faith.

What Jesus invites him to leave is not his life-giving faith, but his need to apologize for the ways in which other leaders were getting it wrong.

Jesus invites Nicodemus to pay attention to the things that make him uncomfortable and, in doing so, to begin again. He invites him to trust his instincts when they tell him that the ways of the empire are not the ways of God, and to listen to and follow the ways of God.

Jesus invites Nicodemus, not to be "born again" in the American evangelical sense of confessing our sins, praying the right prayer, and taking Jesus into our hearts...but rather Jesus invites Nicodemus to be born again in the sense of aligning his faith with the heart of God.

Perhaps this is a place that reading Eugene Peterson's *The Message* comes in handy. In that translation John 3:17, so the last verse that we heard, reads this way,

“God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.”

If we can set down some of the things that we have been taught and read this story anew, we are invited to hear it as an invitation to shape our faith in ways that help change the world. We are invited to hear it as an invitation to begin again with commitments that reflect God’s heart. We are invited to hear it as an invitation to let our relationship with Jesus not be solely about securing our home in heaven, but to allow it to change us in ways that mean we work to create God’s kin-dom here on earth.

We are invited to hear this story as an invitation to critique our own faith from the inside out, to reform our faith and to learn to tell the story of the faith that we are called to embody - a faith that is about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving voice and agency to the oppressed, and fighting injustice.

If we can be honest, we, like Nicodemus, are caught in a situation where Christian faith has entered into a toxic relationship with empire. And so Christianity, as it seems to be represented in the headlines, too often cooperates with money and power, with injustice and white supremacy, with bigotry, sexism, and antisemitism. And this is the culture in which we have existed for so long that we sometimes don’t even think to critique it.

But, perhaps we are invited to begin again.

Perhaps we are invited, like Nicodemus, to spend some quiet time in the dark of night where we can be most honest, invited to ask difficult questions, to discover ways that we cooperate with kingdoms that are not of God, and to seek to change and be changed from the inside out.

Perhaps we are invited to wonder what would happen if we broke free of the values of this world and chose the values of God.

Perhaps we are invited to begin again, looking fresh at the heart of God, and shaping our faith by it.

Perhaps we are invited to listen to the nudges and the possibilities, and to choose another way...to choose the way of kin-dom building.

How do we begin again?

Sometimes it is in very personal ways, embracing a new understanding...opening ourselves to new people...seeing things in a new light.

Sometimes it is within the larger systems in our lives, helping the witness of our faith disconnect itself from an unhealthy relationship with the empire...asking questions about the systems within which we live and holding them accountable.

How do we begin again?

The road is not the same for each of us. But we are invited to do it one step at a time, in the company of a loving God, in the footsteps of Jesus, the one who we follow.

How do we begin again? Maybe we have to let that answer reveal itself. Meanwhile, we are invited to start. Amen.