

The Wind Blows Where It Will Timothy L. Carson
John 3:1-17 May 27, 2018

This story plays like the best whodunit ever written – the intrigue, clandestine meeting, and shrouded encounter. Under the cover of night the public religious figure arranges to meet with the radical reformer. Nicodemus was the one and Jesus the other.

Only one Gospel reports this, John, and I'm glad it wasn't lost. What's more there are parts of this story that play just like every other story in John. Let's tune in.

Nicodemus was a leader of the Pharisees – an enthusiast charismatic party – and also a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin – the highest judicial council. He held a position of influence and respect. He had listened to Jesus with interest and was attracted to Him in ways not even he could understand. And so he decided to meet him under the cover of darkness.

Of course there has been much speculation about just why it went down just that way.

Some speculate that Nicodemus was avoiding detection by his own party; he didn't want to be vilified or identified with Jesus in a public way. It's a bit like politicians who say one thing in public to court the favor of their base or peers but in private express a quite contradictory opinion. And so some say Nicodemus was doing just that, avoiding detection.

I was reading Augustine and Luther this week and their commentary on this scene. They both turn the story into an allegory about the light of truth and its opposite darkness: Nicodemus couldn't understand because of his darkened spiritual awareness and yet longed the light of life. That's why he came under the cover of darkness. I find that unconvincing.

As the story goes the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus takes the same form as many others in John's Gospel – Nicodemus becomes a "straw man" who asks questions that Jesus can expound on.

So when Jesus says that you must be born *anōthen* (Gk) – again or from above – Nicodemus asks how someone can re-enter the womb and be born again. He takes the literal sense of the word – again – but Jesus accents the spiritual meaning – from above – a spiritual re-birth. Only then can you understand these things, enter the Kingdom, Jesus says. Without a change of the inner heart - the way one sees and understands - nothing is apparent. They see, they see, but they do not understand.

There is a tension between the received tradition – what Nicodemus knows and teaches – and the spiritual wisdom which has been revealed to and through Jesus. One is earthly and one is heavenly. In fact, God loves the world so much that the wisdom of God has been revealed through the son so that all might have life in all its abundance. God so loved the world ...

Those who love evil flee the truth, says Jesus, and those who long for truth are drawn to it. Yes, this is a “come to Jesus” moment. The soul is tested. Everything that was assumed is called into question.

Nicodemus chose this. He came to Jesus. What did he expect? Or more, what did he hope for?

Trying to shift Nicodemus from his rational self to his more spiritual, imaginative, intuitive self, Jesus says, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it is coming from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” (3:8)

How do you teach about the Spirit? As Jesus appeals to a metaphor he says it’s like the wind – invisible yet powerful.

And that is the interpretive clue that helps me understand this whole story. *Nicodemus has become caught up in this powerful wind.* He doesn’t know where it has come from or where it is going, but he has to find out. Nicodemus has the wind at his back. And it takes him to Jesus ... in the shadows. And that, I think, is far from negative. This is the story of a soul leaving the shore and wading into deep, uncharted waters.

Nicodemus is every one of us who is willing to leave ego, control, security and certainty in order to launch into the free uncertainty of the Spirit that blows where it will and when it will. And what about going to Jesus by night? Isn't that walking by faith and not by sight? Don't we walk through the shadows on the way to a new day?

What courage this takes! Every risk of faith requires a wrestling with the angel in the dark, taking our deepest doubts and fears to God, being so vulnerable that we present our deepest questions to the source of all wisdom, the source of love.

Nicodemus goes to Jesus and Jesus points him to the Spirit that is blowing where it will. And if we are willing to go we find the same thing.

What if you risk all under the cover of night and steal away in search of the deepest truth you can find? And what if the answer you receive is not a proposition so much as a mystery?

What if when we leave all we know is that we have to be reborn to find it and that the Spirit is going to come on its own terms? What if the only answer we get is love and that God is so full of it that we won't be left alone to struggle alone?

We're left wondering about Nicodemus and what impact that conversation in the night had on him. We don't know much but we know two things:

When Jesus was dragged before the Sanhedrin Nicodemus was the one who defended him and said that everyone deserved a trial. And we know that when Joseph of Arimathea prepared Jesus' body for burial it was Nicodemus who helped anoint Jesus' body and placed him in the tomb.

Did Nicodemus become a secret disciple of Jesus? Why else would he be anointing Jesus' body for burial? And what did he do after that among those who also followed the Nazarene?

Tradition has it that Nicodemus was later martyred but there is no evidence. And he was made a saint in the Catholic Church.

The answers to those questions we will never know. But I ask you this:

Why did John tell Nicodemus' story in the first place, his nighttime journey to Jesus, his defense of Jesus, his anointing of his body for burial, unless he became a part of the continuing story of Jesus and his people. If he had not, would he have earned such cameo roles in John's Gospel?

Sometimes all it takes is a night journey of faith to change your life and the lives of others, if not now, then later. The wind blows where it will and we don't understand at the time. But we will. Thanks be to God, we will.