

**Seekers, Sinners, Saints: Profiles in Faith  
(II) He Asked Questions**

A Sermon by Pastor Louise Westfall

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**Text: John 3:1-17**

Several of you sent me an internet puzzle, an intriguing question that I invite us to consider while we think about the riddle of faith. If you know the answer, please keep quiet for now, so that others may discover it for themselves. *What is greater than God; more evil than the devil; the rich lack it; the poor have it; and if you eat it, you'll die? What is greater than God? More evil than the devil? What do the rich lack—and the poor have? And if you eat it, you'll die?*

Now I know there's a certain danger that some of you aren't going to hear anything else I say this morning! That's okay, because this is a sermon about the value of an inquiring mind and heart and soul. To journey, like our forebear Abraham; to be a seeker, rather than a settler. Some of life's persistent questions admit no ready answer, and the struggle to discern meaning in them can yield surprising insight and blessing. In his *Letter to a Young Poet*, the philosopher Rilke wrote, "I would like to beg you....to have patience with everything that is unsolved in your heart and try to cherish the questions themselves. . . the answers cannot be given you because you could not live them. Live the questions now."

I offer this sermon series during Lent to assist us all in living our questions today. Each week we will meet biblical seekers, sinners, and saints whose encounters with Jesus changed them, sometimes in ways they couldn't have imagined. Now I do not believe that Scripture dispenses answers the way a vending machine dispenses candy bars. But I do believe we can discover within its ancient words the Word of God speaking to us today. Our searching takes on a whole new dimension when we resist reading for answers and instead listen for that Word. We may find we haven't even been asking the right questions!

The gospel text this morning is a fascinating conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a religious leader. It's clear that this is not the first time Nicodemus has had dealings with Jesus; he comments appreciatively about the significant healings and authoritative preaching Jesus has done. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus would have been well-educated and thoroughly schooled in religious thought and practice. What prompted him to seek out this new young rabbi? The gospel writer notes he made his visit at night, and many have suggested that might indicate his desire to converse with Jesus privately, away from the crowds (and the disapproval of his colleagues?). Certainly he had heard things in Jesus' teaching that challenged ideas he'd been taught since childhood. Maybe he was moved by the compassion Jesus consistently showed, or the compelling way he

spoke of God's Kingdom as if it were truly near. Or maybe his own life seemed pale and hollow in contrast to the passionate, purposive and joyful teacher who seemed to possess something Nicodemus lacked.

What would you have asked Jesus that night? What questions might you and I have raised with him about the contradictions, conundrums, and heartaches in our own lives? Listen, seekers, for God's Word to you, in the reading from the gospel according to John, in the third chapter at the first verse. [JOHN 3:1-17]

A story on National Public Radio's *This American Life* recently told about the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's annual puzzle-solving competition. Teams of brilliant engineers, mathematicians, and Really Smart People from all over the country gather to solve a series of complex and stunningly difficult puzzles which this year provided clues to find a single coin hidden somewhere on MIT's grounds. The reporter's description of the puzzles clearly showed that these weren't brain teasers but mental mind-blowers. But what really got me was a contestant's response to the question put to him by the reporter: What's fun about this? Why do you do it? "Because," he replied, "tough as they are, every one of these problems has a solution...unlike life."

Solving the puzzle called life....it may be a common human impulse to want the answer key, to learn the secret of success, to know the truth in high-resolution clarity. That can certainly account for the popularity of self-help gurus purporting to offer "the solution" (for a price, plus postage and handling). It can explain what attracts seekers to religious groups who claim that truth is absolutely clear and easily available (I've seen a bumper sticker that reads "The Bible said it. I believe it. And that settles it"). But sooner or later, life reveals itself to be infinitely more complex than any formula, any mantra, any "secret" can possibly contain.

In fact, Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus suggests that attempts to do so are inherently flawed because they are reductionist, making small and finite and manageable what is infinite and eternal and glorious beyond anything we can imagine. Instead, he refocuses the discussion upon images of birth and rebirth, of wind that blows outside human control—metaphors that speak of process rather than content, a way rather than a formula or a set of propositions. Jesus leads the self-assured, experienced teacher of the Law on a wild excursion into uncharted territory and a whole new realm of possibility until he's left gasping "How can this be????!"

And who can blame him? Did you follow the flow of Jesus' argument? Nicodemus tries to zero in on first one point and then another, and each time Jesus' response seems to come from a totally different place. He's not telling Nicodemus how to solve his life, but how to live it. And it is a matter, not of more life, but of new life. A change of heart, mind and soul. Turns out, Christians are neither born nor made, but rather re-born, baptized by the Spirit to a life of seeking and learning, a way characterized not by arrogant certainty but by

humble faith, and openness to new insight and mid-course correction. A wise woman of this church gave me a concrete example of how this works in her family. “We have Laws,” she began, “and we have laws. The Laws are immutable; the laws can always be talked about, modified, re-written to fit different circumstances.” I knew exactly what she meant. Good parenting consists not of squeezing your children into pre-determined molds of your own making, but of nurturing their unique gifts and personalities to grow into someone entirely new and unclone-able. They may pass through phases (and even end up!) someone their parents don’t even recognize (the little dears!) So it is with life in the Spirit.

Because, you know, we are not self-made. We cannot deliver ourselves. Our physical lives –and our spiritual ones—are sheer gifts. We can’t think our way to life, or work our way there. God is the source of life and the beginning of wisdom is to appreciate the distance between us. We who are not God know so little. Truth precedes our perceiving it. Life has more meaning than we’ll ever figure out.

And so we’ll value curiosity and keep seeking. We’ll ask our hard questions and won’t ever settle for proof-texts or pious platitudes that promise far more than they deliver, and like meringue, fill us with emptiness, however sweet to the taste.

But do we not have anything to nourish us during the journey, to guide our seeking? I saw an ad touting the virtues of a particular GPS device for automobiles that said approximately 20 per cent of the mileage we rack up is spent “dwl”—driving while lost. Are we doomed to travel along spiritual highways without a roadmap? --without any clues as to best route and how to get there?

Nicodemus can point us in the right direction. He came to Jesus while he was still “in the dark” and found the light of the world. The purpose of our seeking is not an answer, but a relationship; connection with God who loves the world and gives it life. Jesus bridges that interminable distance between humans and God and shows us God with a human face, a divine way to walk with human feet, divine love to share with human hearts. We are called first of all into relationship with God, by the One God sent to show us. Best-selling author and Presbyterian minister Fred Buechner notes that “faith is the direction your feet take you once you know that you are loved.” And though there may be a single moment when that truth sinks in, it will take a life time of seeking and asking and learning to travel that road.

I have this theory about Nicodemus. We hear about him twice more in the gospel of John—once when he defends Jesus against enraged religious leaders, countering their murderous intent with an appeal to due process. When they respond by ridiculing him, he shuts up. Then following Jesus’ crucifixion, we read that Nicodemus brings more than a hundred pounds of spices for his burial,

which is about enough to embalm an elephant. So I have this theory that Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus that night was enough to fuel his continued search. Following Jesus even from a distance led him into conflict and doubt; he was sometimes courageous and sometimes weak—how else would we know about the confrontation with the religious leaders, a situation in which neither Jesus nor the disciples were present? The pieces fit together only as they are recalled by one who has reflected on their meaning, whose life has been forever changed. Nicodemus' search—which he made in fits and starts---finally brought him face to face with the immensity of God's love and God's intent to love the world to life.

Friends, the answers to all our questions take shape in the life of discipleship—as we follow the One who showed us: *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.* It's as simple—and complex—as that. In Nicodemus we see that to believe is not just agreeing with some theological propositions about Jesus. It's a way of living. To believe is not to settle for what we know (or think we know), but to go where the unseen Spirit blows us. It's a journey to unknown lands, and taken only by faith, in the company of other seekers. But that faith is in the One who is completely trustworthy, and by grace will bring us home.

For God so loved the world....what could be greater than that? Remember the opening riddle? In Jesus we learn the answer: Nothing! Nothing! Thanks be to God!

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## SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Last week at the Lenten study exploring prayer, one of the participants said with some fire that he was troubled by the straightforward affirmation that God answers prayer, there were all too many instances of prayers made in great faith that didn't seem to be answered: the war raged on, the sick person died. Our spiritual practice this morning offers some space to think about the questions swirling around in our minds and souls. In our gospel text, a seeker asks questions of God's Chosen One—a wise counselor, a perceptive listener, an interactive and spiritual person. The result is a challenge to be reborn.

I invite you to relax now....close your eyes....get comfortable...breathe slowly and deeply. In your minds eye, see yourself walking down a dusty, unpaved street in a small Middle Eastern town 2,000 years ago. It's evening, it's dark and it's quiet. In the distance a dog barks, and you hear a child cry out. In front of you is small, square, sandstone house. Your heart beats more quickly as you approach and then knock on a well-worn door.

"Come in," the voice from inside invites. With some hesitancy you enter. In front of you, sitting by firelight, is Jesus. He beckons you to sit down, and as he does

his eyes meet yours, and you experience in extraordinary sense of being known, accepted, appreciated, loved in a way that goes beyond anything you have experienced in your life so far.

“What is on your mind that you long to tell me? Jesus asks. In his presence, you are able to put words around some of your deepest feelings and thoughts.

He speaks again, warmly: “You are a gifted child of God. What untapped gifts, what talents kept hidden, what skills submerged beneath bruised self-confidence are you called on to use, to bring freedom and joy to others?”

The eyes of Jesus never leave yours. “What is your heart’s true desire? What are the questions that propel you to seek? Ask and you will be given. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened unto you.

You know your time with Jesus is at an end. Quietly you prepare yourself to leave. But Jesus motions you to stay a moment longer. Again his eyes meet yours—not a word is spoken, but you sense joy flooding in on you—burdens are lifted—challenges are clarified—the way ahead will not be easy, but you are ready to set out.

Jesus blesses you: My peace I leave with you—still your fears.

You leave his presence. You are at peace.

[adapted from a guided meditation by David Sparks,  
In Worship for All Seasons, United Church Publishing  
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