

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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March 14, 2021

If the gospel of John were a movie, today we get just a snapshot of what would be a longer scene. The snippet of Jesus' words we catch today is part of a larger conversation with a Jewish religious leader named Nicodemus.

We don't know too much about Nicodemus, but we know that he appears three times in John. Each time he appears at night, apparently trying to hide something, or to hide from something.

Scholars speculate that he, as a religious authority, was possibly trying to hide his faith in Jesus because he was afraid of what the rest of his religious community would think. What would they say about a teacher of the Law going for an intimate conversation with this dissident, the rabble-rouser, who overturned the money changing tables at the temple, and was challenging the whole religious establishment?

So Nicodemus visits at night. He is hiding from something and also hiding, keeping in the shadows, the very person he thinks may bring life.

I don't know about you, but I really resonate with the fear of Nicodemus that causes some of this sneaking around. I'm not proud of it, but sometimes I keep the things that make me uncomfortable hidden in the shadows of my mind, out on the edge where I don't have to go to often...out of sight, out of mind.

I had just started my first job, gotten my first full paycheck and I was excited that I finally had something to tithe to the church I attended that year. For about two years I joyfully tithed a chunk every month. But one nightmarish Sunday, the pastor announced that it had been discovered the church administrator had been secretly stealing money. Besides the horrible betrayal of trust that this involved, I was rocked that all that I had given to the church didn't go where I thought it was. I was shaken. The details of the amounts and figures are a blur for me now. But I felt naïve. I felt ashamed for myself and for the church.

This experience has remained in one of those shadowy corners of my mind that I'd prefer not to visit too often. That I haven't brought out to show or talk about it with others. Instead, it became another reason why I didn't like talking about money and another reason that I felt insecure in how I handled my own money. And adding to a sense of shame and irony- Due to working abroad and then in a series of part time jobs I've never made as much as I did at that first job and I've never been able to tithe as much as I did back then. But If I don't talk or think about any of that- it'll just go away, right? And not cause any problems at all...right?

No....we all know that's not how it works. But, perhaps, if you are like me, you never were taught or modeled healthy ways to talk about hard topics like money. Or for you maybe it was talking about death. Or getting older. Or sex. Or Relationships. And if we are honest there are a lot of topics that work this way—like racism. And sexism. Like Privilege. And homophobia.

But not talking about them, has very human and harmful effects... we condemn ourselves and others. We condemn ourselves because we miss out on participating fully in those areas and finding peace or finding something unexpectedly life-giving in those areas. And we condemn others who suffer by our silence...

But in the case of Nicodemus the very thing he was hiding- his faith in Jesus- is what Jesus was encouraging him to bring to the light because once he brought it into the light out of the day, he would see that faith in Christ held the key to healing and wholeness.

Nicodemus' faith ancestors knew what it meant to have the very thing they feared be the source of their healing. Jesus references the time that Moses raised a serpent on a stick in the wilderness. This happened when the Israelites were suffering from a horrible plague of snakes and when they pleaded with God, God commanded Moses to raise a bronze serpent on a stick and whoever looks at, even though bitten, will live. When the very source of their fear was brought to light, lifted up, it became the source of their healing.

Not only is the snake on the stick is a powerful symbol of healing adopted by organizations like the World Health Organization and the American Medical Association but it represents how something can contain both the poison and the cure.

Like antivenom where the poison of a snake itself is used to create antibodies in small animals that then can be used for humans in the case of a poisonous

bite. Or many vaccines that use part of the harmful virus itself to create the cure, a vaccine that prevents sickness.

For me, my anti-venom for my fear and shame around money has been hearing churches that have experienced similar nightmare situations of money laundering/stealing and how they've grown from it, the measures they have put in place to prevent this sort of thing. My snake on pole has been hearing ministerial leaders like Pastor Jason talk openly and honestly about his tithing. I see that talking about difficult topics, bringing them out from the shadows- can turn something that I wanted to avoid talking about at all costs to something life-giving for me and others.

Perhaps your anti-venom or your snake on the pole when it comes to what you keep in the shadows, those topics you hide from, is something else...perhaps therapy, or a book club, a class, or other safe spaces where you can explore difficult topics.

Jesus reminds Nicodemus of the promise of life at the root of God's sending God's son to the world. And Jesus reminds Nicodemus of God's mission in the world, through Christ, which is not to condemn (because we do enough of that by ourselves already!)- but to save.

As we continue in the season of lent, Lent can be a time we dread. But it can also be a time to find the abundant life through Christ in unexpected places. For me, this year, Lent has been a time where I've revisited my old "frenemy" - money and my relationship to it. It's been a time to question why do I tend to keep it in the shadows, why don't I talk about it more? To question why don't I

share that I tithe, not the full 10% but that I am working up to it? And encourage others to do the same who might be in the same situation. And its been a time to challenge myself to talk about my money and giving practices more, so that what I do with it isn't just a matter of my personal life, but so that it can be one more resource I lift up for the whole community, for all to see, learn from, and draw life from it.

My hope, dear friends, is that this Lent, we would ALL find the life that Christ invites us to in unexpected places. That we would bring to light topics that we don't normally talk about, or consider Lenten practices we don't normally consider, as a first step to taking the opportunity that Christ gives us to receive that life and healing and WHOLENESS in places we thought only held discomfort, bad news and pain. That we would receive with faith the abundant grace and healing through Christ that God offers us every day. AMEN.