

(Matt 11:25)

Trying to Answer Questions: Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well.

Hmmm. That sounds like a pretty odd collection of elements. I imagine that you all might be thinking: It actually sounds a lot like something from one of those party games where you have different piles of tiles – A pile with bible verses, a pile with bible stories, and a pile with some kind of vague title. The rules of the game: you have to pick a verse, two stories and a title and somehow fit them all together. I promise you, that's not how it happened!

Last year, when I faced the prospect of talking about an essential bible story, I didn't have to think at all. I knew immediately that it was Ruth, and that it was essential to me because Ruth taught me about the necessity of creating my own spiritual basecamp (to continue the backpacking metaphor of this series) – about the work that I would have to put into that, and about the joy to be found not only in the resulting community, but in the work itself. It had been percolating for a while and it came quite easily to me.

Not so at all this summer. This summer when I asked myself the question – what is my essential bible story, at first I thought well, it's still Ruth right? Not that much time has passed, it's OK for it still to be Ruth. But then I thought, well (FIRST) I probably shouldn't talk about Ruth again and (SECOND) even if I were to talk about Ruth, it wouldn't mean exactly the same thing to me this summer as it did last because [as pretty much anyone who studies the bible regularly will agree] you hear a story or a verse differently each time you visit it, and you take different lessons from it because each time you read or reflect you are at a different place in your spiritual journey.

So, although Ruth is an essential bible story, and will always be especially important for having set me on a spiritual journey that is all my own – Ruth is not my essential story for this morning. The problem: I still wasn't sure what my next essential bible story was. What I have these days are questions! Lots and lots of questions.

Today I am going to tell you two stories: those of Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well (both from the gospel of John). I'm also going to tell you how I got to these stories because they are very new essential stories to me (although they are familiar in other contexts). I may also tell a story about a Russian peasant pilgrim, but only if there is time – because I have quite likely bitten off more than I can chew.

OK. So, how I got to these two stories:

Not Ruth – but I still didn't know what instead. I was fairly lost. At first, feeling lost and much more full of questions than answers, I thought, well, there are certainly a lot of bible stories I don't understand – one in particular - the parable of the dishonest manager (from Luke Chapter 16:1-15) has been especially bothering me for a couple of years, there is also the story of Jesus and the withered fig tree (Matthew 21:18-22), even Job (WHY? Though that one has actually been beautifully covered in this series in the last couple of years) – I thought: I could call it “bible stories that make you go HMMMMMM?”

And I suppose my point there would have been that bible stories that make you go Hmmm? Are essential because they demonstrate clearly that there is always going to be more to learn, that one's spiritual journey, to the extent it can be measured by how completely one knows and understands the bible, is long and winding and that that is OK. But then, I still didn't have an answer to "What?" or "Why?" for any of the stories I could think of, so it didn't seem worth YOUR time for me to talk about them.

(I was talking to a wise friend about this who said, well, you know you don't really NEED to provide answers, it is enough to point out that the bible doesn't always give us answers, it gives us stories, and the point of stories is just as importantly the raising of questions as it is the offering of answers – that is what growth is all about! Of course, she is exactly right about that! Nevertheless I went on – looking for a single essentially puzzling story I might tackle.

I began to poll my family – my family is always willing to be polled – though they don't always stick to the question at hand - my parents, my siblings, my wonderful sister in law.

I began the poll looking for "bible stories that make you go Hmmm?" They had some suggestions. But my father, to whom my mother had passed the question on for me, came back with something else. He said, well, if you are looking for an essential bible story, you should talk about James. James is not really a story – but it is clearly my father's answer to the question. James is not one of the books I am most familiar with; and at the time my father suggested that I talk about it, I knew even less. But two things struck me: FIRST that my reaction was immediate and strong – There is NO WAY that will work; James does NOT resonate with me at all but SECOND though nearly as immediate AND actually even stronger: my father is one of my most important spiritual models, so I WONDER WHY NOT James?

My parents live far away – too far – Oklahoma, so most of you have never met them, but if you did know them you would know, even without knowing them well that they are both people of great faith. I talked a little last summer about this as well. As I described then in greater detail, their faith greatly shaped my childhood and set me on the path I continue to follow (as winding and sometimes different from theirs though it may be - they set me on it!). I talked about my mother more last summer, this summer it will be my father. My father is primarily quiet and private in his faith. Although he is a regular churchgoer, except for the occasional Lenten class, he does not attend weekly bible studies or belong to a regular prayer breakfast or other intercessory prayer group. He does not usually talk about his faith unless pressed. He simply lives it – daily, hourly – I have always been aware that it informs everything he does. And he will not tell you unless you ask him, but if you ask him, he will say that his model comes from James (at least that is the answer he has often given me). Here is what is incongruous about it: my father does not talk like James or act like James. He does not scold or admonish, he is not hard nor does he seem to judge. He is gentle, he is funny (he loves puns and thoroughly enjoys clever riddles), he is a greatly respected pediatrician (about to retire at the end of this week actually) who truly and deeply appreciates children. Anytime, my

brother and sister and I would drive him over the edge of patience when we were little, and make him yell at us, we knew that all we had to do was clown a little in just the right way and we could actually make him laugh instead (we were pretty terrible about that actually). Anyway, as far as I know about James – this did not seem like the profile of someone purportedly emulating that book.

So, I decided I must have James wrong and I began to study it. First, I reread it. Still mystified – though I did find some verses I liked. One passage, in particular, chapter 1 verses 5 and 6 seemed to speak particularly to my current spiritual coordinates (though it also raised further questions).

“If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.”

But James, generally speaking, is a very difficult model for human beings to follow. I don't know whether this is the right way to say it or not, but I think it is somehow too advanced a model yet to be essential to me: at this point in my journey. It strikes me sort of the way it does when you are just about to put the shirts in the car to take to the cleaners and your husband says “can you take my shirts please, I am about to run out of shirts” or perhaps the way it sounds to him when I say “Could you please take out the garbage, when he already had it on his checklist for the evening” or even more clearly, from childhood, when you had the very good intention of cleaning up your bedroom but hadn't quite started doing so yet, and one parent or the other came in and said “You REALLY need to clean up this room!” James seemed to me too hard – yes, it's right, it is the ideal Christian life – but unless you are someone who already HAS delivered the shirts to the cleaners, taken out the trash, AND cleaned up your room, so to speak, and kind of lives in that tidy state – it is not an easy model.

I had no good answer. So, on a recent trip home to visit, I asked my father – Why James, How James, how does James not drive you crazy? And besides: what about the apparent conflict with what Paul has to say about our being saved by Grace and faith alone (not works)? I have been bothered by that question for a while too!

In reply, my father asked me if I had ever read *The Way of a Pilgrim*. I had not. My mother brought up *Franny and Zooey* by JD Salinger and the fact that Franny is reading *The Way of a Pilgrim* throughout those stories. So I added both those books to my stack. And another question: how could I so love and respect my father (as a spiritual model even) and have such a different reaction to James from his).

My stack of books was growing larger by the hour. So was my set of questions. My essential bible story, on the other hand, was still shrouded in mystery.

I know! What does any of this have to do with Nicodemus or the Samaritan Woman at the Well? Well, in the midst of this growing mass of questions, which was fast coming to resemble a sort of spiritual turmoil, for the more I read the more of a whirling stormwind

of ideas and questions it became in my mind (about faith and works, about faith, belief and doubt, about the parameters of my own community of faith and – and, of course, about why I react so differently to James from my father whom I so greatly love and respect, , I stopped to prepare for my turn to lead discussion for our summer bridge of the Dean’s Women’s Bible study. We are a smaller but solid group that likes to continue to meet even through the hot slow summer – it’s a community we count on – and those communities are very important! Anyway, this particular week included a reading from Matthew which concludes with one of my favorite passages:

Matthew 11:28-30 Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

I have often taken great comfort in these verses, But there is something just before that - chapter 11 verse 25 – that goes like this: “**And at that time Jesus said, “I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.”** This verse precedes the very one that has been familiar and comforting to me since I was a small child. But somehow, I had not particularly focused on it before, and now, as I did so, it really began to bother me. As a person who has always approached questions and problems as though I could study my way through them, to hear Jesus himself say that is NOT the way to spiritual enlightenment, and that in fact, it might even be an impediment, was greatly disturbing – especially because the more I thought about it, and all of my questions, the more it seemed to be so very true. I suddenly felt as though I had taken two steps back instead of any steps forward. I suddenly felt as though I could not do as Jesus suggested in vv28-30 if I fell into the first category he mentions in v.25. What did it mean to be in that category (the wise and the intelligent) and what could I do make sure I was in the other one (infants)?

Helplessly, I still turned to a book – but this time, the Bible – I turned to bible stories. I was looking for models for asking questions. I thought of two people who ask Jesus questions, apparently from positions of some knowledge of the world, for whom the asking is transformative. I thought of Nicodemus and of the Samaritan woman at the well from chapters 3 and 4 of the Gospel of John

Nicodemus

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. As most of you probably remember, the Pharisees were community leaders in Judea (particularly according to the Gospel of John), They were a learned scholarly group, expert in Jewish law – to whom the people tended to turn for guidance in proper Jewish behavior and belief. In chapter 3 verse 10 Jesus refers to Nicodemus as a “teacher of Israel” So he is clearly portrayed as a learned leader.

IN SHORT: He is someone who is supposed already to have all of the answers. And yet, he has heard of Jesus and his teaching and acts and it raises questions for him. So, here he is – coming by night, to ask Jesus a question.

The fact that he comes by night appeals greatly to the poetic side of me (first because it conjures for me, images of a moonlit courtyard, perhaps with a light wind rattling palm leaves), but second because there are so many possible explanations for that detail –

1. It could be that Nicodemus was worried WHAT his Pharisaic colleagues would think of his having come, OR
2. It could be that he was embarrassed, as an expert in Jewish law, to be asking a question of anyone, OR
3. It could even be simply that he wanted to avoid the crowds that came to Jesus by day.
4. One other possibility is that the Author of the Gospel made it night in order symbolically to dramatize the spiritual enlightenment of Nicodemus – his coming out of the darkness into the light of Christ.

Any of these is possible (or all of them are) and that is part of the great beauty of every bible story. Anyway, depending upon how you imagine his motivation for the timing of his visit, it might change the emphasis in the story, but not so much the import of the question-asking, at least not for me here.

Intrigued by what he has heard Jesus has been doing (he focuses on the “signs” he has heard about), Nicodemus first seems to ask Jesus for confirmation that he is “come from God” (I say “seem to” because it is not really phrased as a question). Jesus replies “No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above. [the Greek word here for “from above: – AH-noh-then - can also mean “anew” – So, it could also be read “No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born anew”]

Nicodemus, perhaps to push the argument (or perhaps because he really doesn't understand), pretends to take the answer literally, and follows with another question – how can anyone be born after having grown old, how can one go back into the mother's womb to be born (taken figuratively it's actually startlingly similar, now that I think of it, to my question (raised by Matthew 11:25) about becoming an infant again)

Jesus answers as simple and direct a way as he ever does – drawing a distinction between two kinds of birth – that of flesh, and that of water and the Spirit. Being born anew of water and the spirit is what must happen, he explains.

Nicodemus is still a bit lost and asks one more question – this time as simple as questions come: How can this be? (Almost like my own young son's so-frequent HOW? Or WHY?) Nicodemus does not understand yet, but he keeps trying.

Jesus answers essentially saying – because it IS as I have told you (This strikes me as being very much like my “because I told you so!” When my 5-year old asks me one question too many, and I know that whatever I say is not going to make sense to him.

Jesus is finally saying: If you can't get this simple answer, you are certainly not going to understand any more complicated one – so just go home and live with it for a while!) So, Nicodemus (apparently) does just that.

Nicodemus – a learned leader – along with the other Pharisees (in the Gospel of John) has been paying attention to what Jesus has been doing. Even in the midst of all his knowledge, wisdom and intelligence, and particularly his FAITH, what he has heard raises questions for him. He recognizes that the answer to his question is not to be found in any book, and may only be asked of the Source “this teacher who has come from God” (3:2). So he comes by night, he asks his question, which raises other questions he also pursues. He listens to the answers and he goes away challenged to change, or to put it another way, on the pathway to change.

Even though he disappears from this chapter without any account of his leave-taking, we know he has ultimately been changed by the encounter because the next time we see him, in chapter 7, he is standing up for Jesus before the chief priests and other Pharisees – reminding his colleagues that according to the same law they all seek to uphold, Jesus ought to be given a fair hearing before he is arrested. As a result, his colleagues accuse him of having become a Galilean follower. Again, he disappears without a trace, but we have seen him and know that he has heard what Jesus was saying.

Just to complete the story – Nicodemus appears once more in the Gospel of John, just after Jesus's crucifixion, in chapter 19. At this point, he brings 100 lbs of myrrh and aloes to help Joseph of Arimathea care for Jesus' body according to Jewish burial custom, and to lay it in a tomb in the garden. They were the only two there – none of the disciples, none of the women, everyone else had gone, in that dark time. Clearly Nicodemus' heart had been open when he asked his questions in the darkness, and clearly he ultimately found answers there – answers which quietly filled his faith.

Again I like the role darkness plays in this story (almost bookending it in my imagination – he comes into the story by night, he leaves the story in the darkness of the tomb) because as a mother of two young very active boys, I often find that my only moments for quiet reflection happen when it is dark (because that is when they are asleep). Lying awake in the darkness late at night, or sitting in the darkness before dawn with a quiet cup of coffee but no electric lights, those are the times I become aware of my questions (and often also when my questions torture me), and those are also the times I sometimes come upon answers.

Anyway, to summarize: Nicodemus is a learned leader, by tradition much more often a giver of answers than an asker of questions. But (1) he is not afraid to ask questions when they do arise for him (even if – according to the most uncomplimentary interpretation of those I suggested above – he might at first have done so only in secret – by cover of night) (2) having asked, he understands the importance of listening to the answers, insisting with further questions when he still does not understand, and then (presumably, considering the continuation of the story in chapters 7 and 19) retiring to sit

with that answer whether it was what he might have expected or hoped for or not, until he does understand.

His spiritual development here is quiet. I think that is another significant reason his story is essential to me (not only does it demonstrate how a person in the “wise and intelligent” category can make himself again like an infant, for the purpose of receiving spiritual truths – his experience also shows that it may happen rather undramatically and quietly, through a simple conversation held on a regular run of the mill night. Spiritual development can happen this way too. It does not have to be like the way it happened to Paul, for instance – struck down in the road and suddenly dramatically changed.

Being blessed with a relatively quiet life, I appreciate confirmation that it is not impossible spiritually to develop in the absence of great adversity. Adversity would be a strange thing to have to wish for. This story confirms for me that spiritual development every bit as powerful and sure can occur incrementally through faithful questions and time spent considering answers – accepting and struggling with those answers whether they are expected, or unexpected, and even when they are difficult.

So, while Nicodemus tells me more about the importance of asking questions when you have them (and of not seeing them as necessarily threatening to your faith), the story of the Samaritan woman seems to tell me more about answers, or about always being open to where you might run across them.

Samaritan Woman at the Well

In this story, from chapter 4 of the Gospel of John, Jesus is on his way to Galilee, by way of Samaria. His disciples have gone into the nearby town to buy food, and have left Jesus sitting by a well. This time it is noon.

A Samaritan woman comes to draw water and Jesus asks her for a drink. Recognizing him as a Jew, and surprised by his request because of customary enmity between the Samaritans and the Jews, she asks him about it.

He replies “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you “give me a drink, you would have asked HIM instead for a drink and he would have given you living water”

The Samaritan woman – much like Nicodemus at the beginning of his exchange with Jesus – begins by taking Jesus literally (it is also possible at this point that she thinks he is crazy for having answered thus – put yourself in her shoes!) – asking how he plans to get any water out of the well beside them without a bucket, and where he thinks he is going to get the living water he is talking about.

In reply, Jesus distinguishes the water from this well, which only temporarily quenches human thirst from the water He offers which becomes a spring inside each person who drinks it – gushing up to eternal life.

The Samaritan woman, (I am paraphrasing with my own emphasis here) says, “Well then, DEFINITELY give me some of that!! (or at least that is the fairly irreverent way I have tended to read her response). Again, I think in order to understand the import of what happens next for my purposes, you have to put yourself in her shoes.

Then, things get more complicated. Jesus tells her to go and get her husband and come back. She tells him she has none. He replies that he knows that to be true because she has had five husbands and the current one is not her husband.

She is amazed that he knows all this about her and recognizes by this that he is a prophet. So she asks him something that has been bothering her for some time, it seems – she asks him (again, I am paraphrasing) “what is the deal with the fact that Samaritans say God should be worshipped on Mt. Gerizim but Jews say Jerusalem is the place?”

Jesus responds that soon there will come a time when it will not matter where people worship because worshippers will worship in spirit and truth.

Something about this statement prompts her to bring up the Messiah. I can only see it as her faith that there WILL BE a Messiah. She says. “I know the Messiah is coming, who is called Christ, and when he comes he will proclaim all things to us. (It is almost as though she ends with the question with which Nicodemus began his conversation: “Are you He?” Are you the Messiah?). Jesus tells her “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” That is the end of the conversation.

He knew her, so she recognized him as a prophet.

She asked him a question that seemed to have been bothering her for a while, a question she had been living with.

In his answer, she recognized Him.

She went back into town and told everyone she knew about her experience, and thereby prompted many conversions. But her own spiritual development here was through a quiet and quite unexpected conversation at a well. She was only going to draw water and simply happened upon Jesus. She had not, like Nicodemus, sought him out at that particular time. But having found him there, she was ready with her question, and ready to hear the answer – without benefit of a miracle or Old Testament-style thunder and lightning of any kind. It was simply that he knew her. **The Samaritan woman represents someone, to me, who always lives with her questions, which makes her always open to answers, wherever in life they might appear.**

I see Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman both as people of faith, people who have always had faith (or at least who have a steady faith by the time we meet them), but have seen or heard or read something that makes them question some aspect of something they have believed or have been taught to believe. So, in faith, they ask their questions. In neither story is there thunder or lightning or any great disaster or miracle. In both cases, it is a matter of a private, quiet conversation – held at night in a moonlit courtyard, or under the noonday sun by a well along the highway (but it could just as easily be a

conversation in a grocery store, a restaurant, an airport, a friend's living room, or even the Atrium out there). In both cases, the questioners are strong enough in their faith, AND open enough in their hearts, both to ask their questions and to listen to the answers they are given.

To go back to my troubling verse from Matthew: They are two people who are otherwise wise or intelligent (though differently so), who have managed to make themselves infants with regard to spiritual truths. The reward of this, as I now see it, is that it makes them free to take Jesus up on his invitation in 11:28-30 to lay their burdens down and follow him. In a very real way, asking your questions and listening to the answers (in faith) IS laying a burden down.

I will stop here – though my massive pile of books has provided me with about 40 more minutes worth on James and Paul, on *The Way of a Pilgrim*, and more. I think it makes more sense to stop here

I then said a little more about how reading *The Way of a Pilgrim* showed me what my father was getting at – that you don't have to be hard like James to follow James. You can be like the Pilgrim. I got that, but that I still found James hard.

I also talked a little about how this did not mean that I would stop reading. I love to read and will always read. That I think extra-biblical reading, though I understand it cannot provide ultimate spiritual truths, can certainly point a person toward them (and I am talking about everything from commentaries to science, to biographies to novels). Reading is still important, it is just that it ought not be counted on alone. Prayer, Contemplation and Conversation are also vital.

Then I really did stop.