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## *The Invitation of Nicodemus*

**A sermon by Canon George Maxwell**  
**Lent 2 – Year A**

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was a beautiful Saturday morning. I was walking down a crowded street with my spirits soaring when I saw him standing there on the corner. He looked like he might have slept there to ensure that he had that spot in the morning, and he was holding up a placard. A placard that had the words of John 3:16 written on it.

But it was in the shape of a cross. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.”

That captured my attention, and as I stared at it, wondering if “perish” was written just a little larger than “eternal,” I realized that I had made a terrible mistake. I had allowed myself to engage in eye contact with him. I know better than this, and I knew what was coming next.

“Hey brother,” he said, “Have you been saved?”

Now I may have made a mistake, but this is not my first time at the rodeo. I have an answer.

“Every day,” I said. “God saves me every day.”

It's a clever response, you have to admit. It takes subtle issue with his theology. It leaves me feeling slightly smug.

And it lets you walk on by without having to really engage at all.

There is a temptation I think to treat Nicodemus as if he is one of these street preachers.

The story is so familiar, we already know what's going to happen when we hear the words. This is Nicodemus, the great teacher who's so smart that he can't even figure out what Jesus is talking about. He doesn't realize that

Jesus isn't talking about physical rebirth; Jesus is talking about spiritual rebirth.

We can dismiss him. We can walk on by. Yet, if we stop, you have to wonder, why did the early church pay so much attention to Nicodemus? After all, he's only in the fourth gospel. Why did the church in the Middle Ages think of Nicodemus as a saint? Why did liberated slaves after the Civil War look at Nicodemus as a symbol of new birth? Why did Martin Luther King, making a memorable presidential address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967, use Nicodemus as his image for rebirth of the movement?

Why is Nicodemus so important to so many people?

If we stop there on the street corner for a moment, we'll see that there's more to Nicodemus than a confused literalist. He's actually skilled in rhetoric.

Maybe it wasn't a real question. Maybe he was just saying to Jesus, "I know you don't mean physical rebirth.

What are you really talking about?"

It is Nicodemus who defends Jesus when Jesus comes before the Sanhedrin. It is Nicodemus who, with Joseph of Arimathea, is there at the cross, taking Jesus' body down, holding it in his arms, anointing it with oil, and laying it gently in the tomb.

This is Nicodemus, the skilled teacher who moves from approaching Jesus at night to holding Jesus in his arms during the day. This is the invitation of Nicodemus, what we engage if we stop and look and listen to him.

Some of you know that I am just back from a pilgrimage in Africa. We were there for 10 days and I was one of a carefully selected group: mixed race, mixed gender, mixed age, mixed ordination status.

At first I couldn't figure out why me. Why did they ask me? But when we got together, I realized the answer: I was the old white guy.

Now there's a lot of pressure being the old white guy on a pilgrimage for racial reconciliation. But as we went about our journey, and as we learned about slavery, we realized that we were all in need of rebirth, that we were all in need of greater consciousness, greater awareness, greater engagement.

I felt this most significantly very early in the trip. It had been a long day in a less-than-adequately air-conditioned van. I sat over an open spot in the floor so the heat would come up, by a window so the sun could come in. I was a little annoyed.

We were going to Asanmanzi [sp?], the last bath, the place on this particular trade route where those who had been enslaved were taken into the river and bathed so that they could be sold. But I was in no mood for an experience.

Annoyed by the trip, annoyed by the guide, watching the setting sun take away time I had wanted. I wasn't really ready to engage.

But when we took off our shoes, walked down the bank into the river, and stood there in the water, it was impossible not to feel the force of the invitation of Nicodemus.

It was impossible, at least for me, not to think that this river, starting here, was going to flow into the dungeons of the slave castle on the coast.

That this river, starting here, was going to flow into the belly of slave ships crossing the Atlantic.

That this river, starting here, was going to flow into the fields of cotton and sugarcane.

That this river, starting here, was going to flow into reconstruction.

Into Jim Crow.

Into conscripted labor.

Into solitary confinement in our prisons today.

That this river, starting there, was going to flow through all of that history.

I was just overwhelmed, feeling a sense of compassion. No guilt, interestingly, no shame. That wasn't it. Just a sense of compassion about what had happened. A sense of awareness about the truth of what had happened. A raised sense of consciousness about the truth about us and our history.

So I must admit, it was a bit jarring to come back to the United States and to read reports about government officials saying that slaves came over with dreams for a better life for their children. Or that historically black colleges and universities were pioneers in school choice.

And yet there was a temptation to engage those comments with the same denial that we hold for the street preacher. It's a

mistake to get drawn into that battle.

Just as it was a mistake to argue for vengeance after the tragedy in Charleston, South Carolina. That's not, I think, what we are called to do. That is not the invitation of Nicodemus.

Instead, the invitation of Nicodemus feels to me like another experience I had, this time in Cape Coast, at St. Nicholas Seminary. We wandered into a chapel service early in the morning to experience a joyful celebration. As we introduced ourselves, identifying our pilgrimage as one oriented to racial reconciliation, we learned about them, these 40 seminarians, who are from different tribes in Ghana, many of whom were speaking different mother tongues. They can't understand each other in their mother tongue. They must communicate in second languages.

And there, behind the altar of the chapel was a black Jesus on the cross. A black Jesus on the cross. And what we heard them say is that they are engaging in their own reconciliation. That some of these seminarians are sons of tribes that were pillaged and pirated for men and women who were enslaved, but that others were the sons of the tribes who did the pillaging and the pirating and the enslaving.

They were about their own reconciliation that had nothing to do with us. And they were telling the truth to each other. They were holding themselves accountable for not only telling the truth, but not blaming. Not getting lost in accusations, but forgiving, believing in their hearts that the forgiveness of God could be stretched over anything that had occurred.

And it dawned on me that this is real faith. Not faith in the sense of believing the right things or saying the right prayers or being in the right place but faith in the sense of trusting God. Faith in the sense of trusting that God will and can redeem everything and anything.

Faith that the truth, once acknowledged, can be redeemed.

And that faith, it seems to me, is the only faith that can ultimately yield racial reconciliation. That faith is the only faith that has a vision for a community to emerge, for everyone to be included.

And it seems to me that that faith is the invitation of Nicodemus. Not to pass the street preacher with a clever, smug response. Not to allow the annoyance of whatever anybody else has done to keep you from the experience, but on your own, to hold the body of Christ in your arms. To anoint the body of Christ with an abundance of expensive ointment. To lay the body of Christ gently and carefully in the tomb.

And in many ways, that's what we have done in this country, bringing diverse groups together working to create a community that honors them and their rights. It's not easy. It's not over. But it is our call, I think.

And it is our faith that whatever has happened in the past, God can and will redeem it. That is our salvation. It is the invitation of Nicodemus not to run away, not to avoid engagement, not to level accusations or blame, but to hold the body of Christ in our arms.

As we traveled throughout Ghana, we developed a ritual. At the end of every meal, when we would be saying goodbye to our host, we said the words of the sixth verse of the twenty-third Psalm. It never ceased to put a smile on our faces and to give us a renewed sense of our common purpose.

So I leave you this morning with these words, these words that I think are the promise that follows the invitation of Nicodemus:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.