

Shortly after my wife and I were married, she started a teaching position with the local school district that was quite outside the ordinary teaching experience. She taught at a nearby Hutterite colony, which, if you've never heard of Hutterites before, the simplest way to describe the community is to say think of variation on Mennonites. Everything is communally owned, including the finances, which are pooled together to support the needs of all in the community. Well, shortly after she started teaching in the 2-room school house, one of the families offered to make us a goose-down comforter – hand-crafted and using down from the geese they raise, of course. It was a beautiful gesture of welcome and we were so thankful that we asked if we could offer some money for the extravagant gift. And that's when things got shady.

She said, "You can pay me whatever you like in cash. Come to my house tonight after sunset and don't tell anyone you're bringing me money." It felt like we were meeting up for some kind of black market deal. My mind began to race. Was this actually allowed? Was there some illegal goose market I didn't know about? Well, as you can imagine, the ideals of the community don't always match the practices of the community. She wanted cash so that she could have some spending money for herself. And she asked us to come at night because she wanted to have us over for snacks and beverages. There wasn't anything nefarious about it; it was just a homemade goose-down comforter that makes me feel like I'm being slow roasted all night.

The Gospel of John makes a clear point about Nicodemus coming to visit Jesus at night. It's intentional enough to lead those who read it to wonder, "What is John getting at here? What is the meaning of a Pharisee who comes to see Jesus at night?" Some have suggested that it's because he didn't want to be seen by his fellow Pharisees. But if that's the case, then why does Nicodemus speak as though he's a representative of the Pharisees? "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God." I suspect this isn't the secretive visit we sometimes make it out to be. There is no ulterior motive.

Instead, I think we would do well to see Nicodemus as an archetype – a character who represents each of us. Seeking Jesus in the dark of night is not a reflection on his desire to be hidden, but clever plot point that shows where he is in his faith journey. I mean, the entire conversation here is a back and forth between Jesus, who states some truth or wisdom, and Nicodemus, who never seems to grasp it. Nicodemus comes by night because that is where he is in his understanding of the faith that Jesus is proclaiming to the world. He's in the dark; he cannot see clearly enough; he does not understand.

But this is not the end of Nicodemus' story. Jesus is not the kind of Messiah who leaves people in the darkness of their lack of understanding, but one who invites us to journey with him in order to grow in faith and love. Nicodemus may not understand now, but that is not the end of his journey. In John, chapter 7, the Sanhedrin is debating their authority to arrest Jesus, when it is none other than our good friend Nicodemus, who speaks against their plan, saying, "The law cannot be used to cast judgement before a person has been given a hearing to find what is true." Already, can you see the progression? That the journey which began at night is already stepping into the light of understanding?

And yet, even this is not the end. Coming to a new insight or understanding is not the end of the road, but a signpost to continue onward. Which is why the last time we hear about Nicodemus in Scripture is at Jesus' death. He helps to remove Jesus' body from the cross, bringing a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes. If this were a journey that never left the darkness of the first nighttime encounter, then Nicodemus would not have any reason to be present at the darkness of Christ's death, he would have no reason to lavishly provide care for one in whom he did not believe. But Nicodemus' story is not just his own. It is the story of a journey into growth and understanding. It is the story of transformation and faith. It is our journey; it is our story.

Nicodemus, like the season of Lent, is a microcosm of the journey of faith, which all of us are on in some form and fashion. It's one of the things that we teach our confirmation youth – that the journey of faith is a spectrum, one where we are constantly moving and experiencing change and transformation. And the frustratingly beautiful thing about the journey is that we never totally "arrive." For the Spirit blows where it chooses, and we hear it and feel it and even see it sometimes, but we do not always understand how it moves; we do not always know where it is leading us.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we need not fear the darkness; we need not worry if we do not understand. Our journey is not about what we can know and understand, but about the deepening of our relationship with the God who is constantly and continuously calling us into the future, one faithful step at a time. We are all Nicodemus. And together we are all being led by the power of the Holy Spirit to experience the promise of God for ourselves: "That God so loved the world, that he gave his only son. That in the journey of faith, we may have eternal life through his love and grace. For Christ came to save. He came to lead us on a journey of growth and discovery. He came so that we would be led out of darkness and into the light of life in him. Amen.