
A Lightbulb in the Heart

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder
The Second Sunday in Lent – Year A**

I have a special fondness for the story of Nicodemus and Jesus talking about God's immense love for the whole world in the middle of the night. I have this vivid picture in my mind—it's the picture from my childhood Bible. A white leather Bible with gold leaf pages and my name inscribed on the front cover. Every few hundred pages of text were interrupted by a single glossy page with a picture on either side, an artist's rendering of a Bible story.

And somewhere in the Gospel of John was one of my favorite glossy pages. It was a picture of Nicodemus and Jesus. The picture had a purple hue because the conversation took place at night. The faces were friendly, curious, open, and earnest. And the faces were close to each other, conveying a certain hushed quality. This was not the sermon on the mount, this was an intimate moment of teaching and care.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus and calls him a teacher who abides in the presence of God. And you can tell that Nicodemus really means what he says. Because when Jesus responds with what sounds like riddles, Nicodemus is not put off. He does not throw his hands up in frustration exclaiming: "What the heck is that supposed to mean, Jesus?" Instead, Nicodemus simply asks: How? And when Jesus responds with more mystery, Nicodemus asks again: How?

Until finally Jesus turns to Nicodemus and says: God loves you. God loves this whole world so, so much. And because God loves the world so much, God sent a piece of Godself—God's own Son—to save the world with love.

And how are we invited to respond to this saving love? We are invited to believe.

I remember learning a few years ago that the English word "believe" comes from the German word *belieben*, which means pleasure or love. It is also linked to the Proto-Indo-European root word *-leubh*, meaning: to care, desire, or love. Can you believe it? Love!

We believe when we hold a particular truth dear to us—when we treasure that truth—when we look at that truth with wonder, joy and affection—when we allow that truth into the vulnerable corners of our hearts—when we are transformed by our *love* for that truth. That's what it means to believe.

Is that kind of belief an accurate description of your faith and mine?

Some days, yes. When I'm worshipping with all of you, singing some of my favorite hymns, blessed by the beauty of this space, blessed by the curiosity of both our little saints and our wizened saints, yes. When I'm walking in the woods or sitting in stillness near the water, yes. When I'm at the deathbed of someone drawing nearer and nearer to God, yes. I believe and I love. I love and I believe.

But it's also true that I sometimes forget to keep my heart in the game. Sometimes I get stuck in my head. Sometimes I'm so busy protecting my heart with my head, that I forget God offers to guard my heart for me. Sometimes I'm so busy protecting my heart with my ego, that I forget I've invited God to take up residence there.

Nicodemus hears Jesus say that one needs to be "born from above" to see the kingdom of God. And Nicodemus responds first with his head, asking: How? Jesus goes on to talk about how a person must be born of water and the Spirit, which is like the wind that blows where it chooses. Nicodemus responds again with his head, asking: How?

But then Jesus talks about God's love for you and me and the whole world. Something clicks. A lightbulb goes off—not in the head, but in the heart.

How do I know Nicodemus believes? How do I know that Nicodemus hears Jesus in his heart and responds to Jesus with love? Because the Gospel of John talks about Nicodemus twice more. In Chapter 7, Nicodemus encourages his peers to listen to Jesus before judging him, and in Chapter 19 he cares for the dead body of Jesus with myrrh and aloe and strips of linen. What a loving response to Jesus's teaching that one sleepy night, when two men sat together talking about new life and God's saving love in hushed voices.

So here's a Lenten practice I'm trying on for size—perhaps you will find it meaningful too. Try replacing the word "believe" with "love" and see if it rings true.

When we recite the Nicene Creed in a few moments, as you say the words "We believe in one God... We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ... We believe in the Holy Spirit..." hold the word *love* in your heart and mind each time you speak the word *believe*. Can the Nicene Creed be for you a statement of belief, but also a statement of love?

And when your friend or family member or even a stranger tells you something difficult to comprehend, asking: do you believe me? Can your response be not just, I believe... but also... I love you?

Because if we can practice belief as a truly loving response in our day-to-day lives, I think perhaps our faith in God will be characterized by love as well. If we can practice belief as a truly loving response, I think we might find that every invitation to believe and love is actually an invitation to be born again. And again, and again, and again.

For God so loved the world... that's where our life's story begins. We are created in love. We are redeemed by love. And it is love that sustains us, still.

Love is not just some warm-fuzzy feeling. Love is not fluff.

Love is what saves us. Love is the stuff of eternal life. Love conquers death. Love creates new life when we feel stuck.

May we, like Nicodemus, believe. May we love boldly like Jesus. May we be born again. Amen.