

# “Be Curious, Not Judgmental”

*John 1:5, 3:1-10, 7:48-53, 19:39-40*

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**Prayer for Understanding** Gracious God please help us be curious and listen to your good news. Amen.

Be curious, not judgmental. Martin Luther King Jr. said: “I am convinced that people hate each other because they fear each other. They fear each other because they do not know each other and they do not know each other because they do not communicate with each other, and they do not communicate with each other because they are separated from each other.”

In the show *Ted Lasso* the judgmental owner underestimates, mocks, and challenges Ted to a game of darts. Ted accepts. As they are playing, Ted tells how people judged him his entire life. Ted was curious as to why people judged him. Their judgments really bothered him. A turning point in his life was when he saw “Be curious, not judgmental” painted on the wall. Ted realized judgmental people are rarely curious. Judgmental people think they have it all figured out, so they judge everything and judge everyone. Ted realized that their judgment of him had nothing to do with him, rather it was a flaw in judgmental people. A nonjudgmental person is curious and asks questions. Ted points out to the judgmental owner, if you were curious, you would ask questions such as: Do you play a lot of darts? Ted played darts every week with his dad. Ted wins the dart game. Be curious, not judgmental.

Thomas Merton said: “The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them.”

Curiosity is a quest to find in one another the goodness that God created in everyone. The goodness God delights in and makes eternal for all to enjoy. Grace cleanses away all that is not good causing each person’s goodness to spectacularly shine. Grace ensures that each person and their goodness is eternal. If you find yourself judging someone, be curious, ask questions. If someone shares something you strongly disagree with, ask: Can you tell me about some experiences that you have had in your life that led you to take the position that you just shared?

When Jesus walked earth, most religious leaders judged Jesus. Jesus asked them questions. Jesus told them experiences, stories, about God’s redeeming grace freely offered to all people.

One religious leader who was curious, not judgmental, was Nicodemus. A reading from the gospel of John. **John 3:1-10 NRSV** “Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’ Jesus answered Nicodemus, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus said to Jesus, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to Jesus, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered Nicodemus, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’”

I invite you to be curious about this scripture. There are lots of questions in this sermon, so perhaps pick up a copy in the gathering space and work through the questions. Parts of this sermon are inspired by Pastor Anna Carter Florence. Is this scripture familiar to you? If yes, how did you initially respond to the account? What are you noticing today that you have not noticed in the past? What has been left out from the conversation? What details stand out for you? Does Nicodemus, or Jesus, remind you of anyone you know? Do they help you see people in a new light? What questions would you ask them? How has this account played out in your own life and in the lives of those around you?

“Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night” Nicodemus is educated, wealthy and comfortable. Nicodemus is a person with power, influence, and authority. Nicodemus’ coworkers harshly judged Jesus and are outraged by Jesus’ love for the rejected,

oppressed, and poor. Nicodemus is nonjudgmental and curious, so he came to Jesus. Nicodemus has much to lose, therefore he is cautious, so he came by night. A person who comes by night does not want to be seen. This visit was off the record. Nicodemus had questions he did not want to ask Jesus in front of his esteemed colleagues.

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People have been trying to figure out what being “born from above” means ever since this conversation. While “born from above” is familiar for most of us it was a new and an explosive line of thought for Nicodemus. What does “born from above” mean to you? “Born from above” means many different things to different people and different denominations. God created the cosmos with variety and interconnectedness. Therefore, instead of getting stuck in demanding our way be enshrined as superior, we are invited to accept variety, be curious, explore, expand love and enshrine freedom for a variety of perspectives. God created the cosmos with diversity and harmony. Therefore, avoid judgement, avoid forcing your perspective upon another, avoid rejecting someone for being different. Embrace each person as they are, to establish harmony. Celebrate every person.

Many different insights are born from “born from above”. We can discern if a perspective is from God by the perspective’s fruit, what the perspective yields. If a perspective yields fear, hate, exclusion, division, creates morals and laws that exclude anyone, then it is likely not from God. If a perspective yields peace for all, love, inclusion, equity, and creates morals and laws that provide freedom for all, it is likely from God.

Context actuates that an aspect of “born from above” is being curious, not judgmental, accepting each person, affirming their uniqueness and celebrating them being true to their authentic self, the way God created them. The context is judgmental religious leaders contrasted with Nicodemus being curious, asking questions and not judgmental. The next time Nicodemus is mentioned in scripture he speaks up for not judging and being curious.

Curiosity is often expanded by sharing experiences. We all have been born. We all hear birth stories. God creates no two people the same. Each person is born a unique masterpiece. Most people holding a newborn baby are filled with joy, wonder, and love. Sadly, humanity sorts people, putting them into all kinds of boxes. Sadly, humanity forms tribes. Sadly, a person often comes to believe that only their way of being and doing is the correct way. Jesus takes us back to our birth and urges us to be “born from above” where all are united in joy, peace, and love for eternity.

We are all beloved children of God, created good and in God’s image. Our LGBTQIA2S+ siblings are created good and in God’s image. When one is not judgmental, curious, asks kind, loving questions, and listens more of heaven is experienced on earth. If one judges, then it is the judgmental person that is diminished for they are cutting themselves off from an aspect of goodness God wants all of us to celebrate.

Next, Jesus predicts that religion will struggle to understand the goodness of all people. Religious people will be slow to celebrate the goodness of everyone. **Nicodemus said to Jesus, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered Nicodemus, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’**

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night for a secret meeting. Nicodemus left the same way—which is to say, unchanged. Nicodemus was not ready to stand up and act on Jesus’ words. Nicodemus was not ready to trade his comfortable life of privilege for a life of love. Nicodemus was not ready to strain the judgement, oppression, fear and hate out of religious tradition to welcome all people with love. Instead, Nicodemus slipped back into the night and continued to watch Jesus from afar, letting fear rather than hope have the upper hand.

The gospel of John states: **John 1:5 KJ21 “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend Jesus.” NRSV “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome Jesus.”**

It took time for Nicodemus to comprehend, to come around. Often it is the comfortable that push aside Jesus' command to love everyone. Often it is the comfortable who struggle to listen to people who see differently. Often it is the comfortable who lack courage to love everyone extravagantly. This story offers hope for those slow to comprehend. And it does not diminish the pain, suffering, and anguish of the judged, who need change now.

Later, the religious leaders had Jesus arrested. **John 7:48-53 NRSV** “**Then the Pharisees said, ‘Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in Jesus? But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed.’ Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, ‘Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?’ They replied, ‘Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.’ Then each of them went home.**”

If you could change one thing in the account to make it unfold differently, what would you change? What surprises you? Does this account inspire you to speak up for people who are being judged? How can curiosity, questions and communication keep peace and end judgements? How can curiosity, questions and communication change oppressive laws and bring all together in community? What tools do we have in our Presbyterian tradition that help people, be curious, not judgmental?

The religious leaders said: “**But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed.**” Again, the point of judgement is actuated. A few educated, wealthy, religious people presumed they know better than others, know better than a person knows themselves. Rather than seeking to understand they label the crowd, and Jesus, accursed.

**Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, ‘Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?’** Nicodemus' call for a hearing without assumed judgement is timid. The religious leaders angrily counter with a cherry picked scripture out of context. **They replied, ‘Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.’ Then each of them went home.**” The religious leaders revert to grade school bullying. If you do not play by my rules, which typically change benefiting only me as the game progresses, then I am going to take my ball and go home. Our tendency is to disengage from tough conversations with different perspectives. If one is not one of the people directly judged, then the easiest thing to do is retreat to the safety of one's home. Hear again the words of Thomas Merton: “The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them.”

Without another word, Nicodemus goes down in silence. Nicodemus does not stand up to the judgmental people. Nicodemus does not use his power for justice, for freedom. Nicodemus protects himself. Who is God calling you to stand up for today?

After Jesus was crucified: **John 19:39-40 NRSV** “**Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.**”

Nicodemus did an extravagant gesture in providing an expensive burial. Was the generous gift partially an attempt to mask his comprehension that he is failing to love everyone? What might have been, if Nicodemus had acted on his first conversation with Jesus? What if Nicodemus more than recognized Jesus, the light coming into the world, but also followed Jesus with his whole heart? What about you? How are you hesitant to love? Who are you hesitant to love?

Nicodemus turns up in the life of every one of us at some point. We can spot Nicodemus in a church meeting when the pressure to keep a majority happy keeps us from advocating for those who are being excluded. We glimpse Nicodemus when our courage wavers, so we decide not to speak up in love. We see Nicodemus every time we disengage from a controversial debate. We perceive Nicodemus every time we ignore the anguish of the outsider by rationalizing change will make the comfortable, uncomfortable. We experience Nicodemus every time we choose judgement over curiosity. And Nicodemus reveals that change is possible, even for an honored teacher. Coming to Jesus by night is not the only option. Neither is paying for an excluded person's funeral. Suicide rates are higher for those mistreated and stigmatized.

Be curious about the entire Nicodemus account. If you could rewrite the ending, what would that rewrite be? What unsettles you? What challenges you? What liberates you? Is your perspective shifting? What will you keep exploring? Does this account echo a recurring theme? What is the key inspiration for you? How will you retell the Nicodemus story to another? What is God calling you to do or be?

Read the Nicodemus account again and throughout your life. No matter how wise we are, no matter how respected a member of the faith community, nor how many years we have spent studying Scripture, there is always more light to see, always. And it may rock our worlds. We will likely find ourselves reconsidering positions we formed long ago. And how does a person find energy to begin a new quest, become a new creation, be “born from above”, again and again, after growing old? Nicodemus learned. So can we. There is always more light to see. Always. Amen