

I have an embarrassing confession to make this morning. Not something a guy should ever admit. Certainly not a manly man like myself. But I have been reading a book written by the same author who wrote the bestseller *“Eat, Pray, Love.”* If you don’t know, *“Eat, Pray, Love”* was a chick flick starring Julia Roberts of a woman who gets divorced and travels around the world to discover herself. It was based on a book written by Elizabeth Gilbert.

You may remember that a few weeks ago I preached a sermon out of 1st Corinthians on marriage. To prepare for that sermon, I checked out a bunch of books on marriage. One of these books was this book called *“Committed: A Skeptic Makes Peace with Marriage.”* I never read it in preparation for that sermon but I have been reading it over the past week. I kind of keep it hidden.

But anyhow, the book is about Elizabeth Gilbert’s real struggle on whether or not to get married to her Brazilian boyfriend who can’t get a VISA to get in the US. Gilbert’s was previously divorced and she spends some time talking about that divorce when she shares this about one particular encounter.

“I once asked my divorce lawyer, when we were really going through the thick of it, how she could bear to do this work – how she could endure watching every day as couples who had once loved each other tore each other apart in the courtroom. She said, “I find this work rewarding for one reason: because I know something that you don’t know. I know that this is the worst experience of your life, but I also know that someday you’ll move past it and you’ll be fine. And helping somebody like you through the worst experience of her life is incredibly gratifying.”

Each week through Lent, these 40 days plus Sundays that lead us toward Easter, we are lifting up a different image from the Scriptures and focusing on that particular image in worship. One of the important but often overlooked parts of this text is that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night.

The gospel of John uses imagery quite a lot. And contrast of light and dark play a very significant part in John's interpretation of the life of Jesus. It is not accidental that John tells us that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Darkness conveys unbelief, ignorance, and temptation. Nicodemus is very skeptical of Jesus and he has lots of questions. So he brings those questions to Jesus when no one else is around.

This exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus has one of the most famous and, I think, one of the most misunderstood lines in all of Scripture. After Nicodemus approaches Jesus, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be "born again." Other translations go with "born from above." Actually both translations are correct. Jesus says no one can see the kingdom of God until they are "born again" or "born from above."

Does Jesus mean a one time event? A one time event when we can say, "I am born again and I am saved." I can now check that off of my list of things to do before I die and refer to it in the past tense? I am saved. I am born again. Is this a one time event or is it something much more? Is being born again, instead, about an invitation into a lifelong event? For some of us, becoming a real follower of Jesus is not something that happens very quickly. It didn't happen for Nicodemus.

In our text, we don't see Nicodemus having an immediate response to Jesus' invitation. Later in the gospel of John we read of Nicodemus giving a pretty weak defense of Jesus. But then when we move to the end of the gospel we see something very different from Nicodemus. Nicodemus is one who appears after the death of Jesus to bring spices to help to bury him. For Nicodemus, faith in Jesus does not come quickly. It is a lifelong process.

Maybe you are right there with Nicodemus in the 3rd chapter of John. Maybe you are in the darkness right now. Not sure what you believe. Not sure if this Jesus thing is something worth believing in. Not sure if this whole Christianity thing is something you can buy into.

Not sure if being part of a church is all that big a deal. Not sure if being a strong and committed Christian is really important. Maybe, like Elizabeth Gilbert in the story I shared, maybe you are in the middle of a very dark period of your life like she was with her divorce lawyer at her side. And maybe all of this darkness is causing you quite a bit of confusion.

And maybe Nicodemus is a good model of faith for you. For Nicodemus is also a skeptic. A person not so sure about this Jesus thing. A person who doesn't have some radical conversion but someone who ventures through life asking questions, seeking answers, asking more questions, seeking more answers. A person who seems to find himself in dark places a whole lot more than he finds himself in light places.

But I invite you to read this text in a whole new light. Not as a text which affirms that to be a true believer you have to be able to name the date in which you accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. Some of us can do that. And for those who can cite a date when true belief started for you then God bless you.

But others of us are on a faith journey much closer to Nicodemus. A skeptic who keeps getting led back to Jesus to ask more and more questions. Someone who feels pretty weak and phony when you try to defend your faith but someone who keeps showing up with more questions. Someone willing to come to the cross with spices because you know he is special in some way but you just can't figure it all out.

I recently came across this story about Tom and his 6 year old son Benjamin. Like many young boys and girls, Benjamin was protesting his bedtime. Frustrated by his father's refusal to budge, Benjamin finally became so frustrated that he said, "Daddy, I hate you!" Tom, his Dad, replied, "I'm sorry you feel that way, Ben, but I love you."

To which Benjamin replied, "Don't say that!" Surprised, Tom continued, "Ben, but it's true – I love you." "Don't say that, Daddy." "But I love you, Ben." "Stop saying that, Daddy! Stop saying it right now!" And then it came: "Benjamin, now listen to me: I love you...like it or not!"

We too may be in a place in our faith journey where we are like Benjamin. Not sure whether or not we love and are willing to follow Jesus. We may be sitting in a pretty dark place.

But Jesus' actions are pretty clear.

Jesus welcomes us.

Jesus desires us to follow.

Jesus loves us, like it or not. Amen.

-Lose, David, workingpreacher.com website and found at http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=463

-Text: John 3: 1-17

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