

2 Lent A

The Rev. Carol Duncan: Deacon

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The Deep End

When I was in middle school my family belonged to an old quarry swimming club called The Blue Hole. The quarry was filled with icy water fed from an underground spring. It was so deep, we heard that the bottom could not be discovered. It was an oval maybe 25ish yards across. The far side of Blue Hole was a cliff at least 15 feet high. To reach it I climbed a steep, narrow dirt path. The unspoken test to prove you truly belonged at Blue Hole was to leap from that pinnacle down to the icy bottomless water below.

Do you remember daring yourself to dive in at the deep end for the first time? When you psyched yourself up and climbed the ladder? You know you can swim, but what about all that air in between you and the water? Your gut turns cold. You face the test.

That's the level of challenge Nicodemus determined to face for himself in our story today. At night, so if it didn't work out no one would know, Nicodemus decides to test himself against the wonder-working new Rabbi in Jerusalem.

Nikodemus had passed the rigorous tests to become a leader of the Jews. As a Pharisee, he was supposed to know all about God. But he was also immensely intrigued by Jesus' unorthodox signs. Jesus had turned water into wine at a huge wedding in Cana. Jesus had chased the merchants out of the Temple that very week, saying they were making the holy place into a secular market. The Pharisees in general were outraged, but Nicodemus secretly desired to taste that wine of Cana.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and called Jesus Rabbi, his concept of Rabbi had all the complications of his lifetime of study. Nicodemus knew a lot, but he didn't know what he didn't know. Jesus was about to dump him in at the deep end of the Spirit, like jumping into Blue Hole. It's a long way down.

Nikodemus tried to impress Jesus by asserting that Jesus must come from God and so they were members of the same club. Jesus replies with the entrance challenge to the spiritual realm of God. You must be born from above. This is such foreign language to Nicodemus that he is triggered to use a Rabbinic arguing method, with a confrontational very physical question. Can I climb back into my mother's womb? I wonder if Pharisees customarily talk about wombs. I bet not. Nicodemus is very flustered and uncomfortable. But Jesus continues to invite and call him into the Spirit.

In John's Gospel, we see Jesus halfway to being Spirit. Jesus knows Nicodemus has studied scripture for years. With him Jesus speaks as to one with a spiritual vantage. Jesus invites Nicodemus to follow him there fully in imagination. You were born of water as you were from your mother, yes, but also now be born from the Spirit.

What is the Spirit? The Spirit is like the wind. In Jesus' language they are the same word. It comes from nowhere and everywhere. You can feel it but you cannot know it. Nicodemus is struggling. He asks. How can these things be? As an answer, Jesus gives Nicodemus a glimpse of how Spirit Jesus can see all of time happening at once, as a whole. Nicodemus knows this story from scripture, but Jesus knows it from his own experience and from eternity.

In Moses' time, Jesus reminds Nicodemus, the people in the wilderness spoke against God. God sent poisonous serpents who bit and killed people. Then Moses pleaded, and God told Moses to make an image of a poisonous serpent out of bronze and put it on a pole. After the people repented they needed merely to look at the serpent lifted up on the pole in order to live. Jesus as Spirit in the eternal NOW compares himself to that pole and himself lifted on the cross. What he can see from that cross is that God so loves the world. The suffering human body does not condemn but loves. Only look to that love to glimpse eternal life.

After all the cryptic talk, Jesus clearly tells Nicodemus the final once-for-all answer to the ultimate test question. God so loves the world that God gave God's own incarnation, God's self, so that everyone who looks to him and sees only love will dwell in eternal life. You must be willing to give up your life to love in

order to dwell in the realm of God. Jesus gives Nicodemus and us everything we need to know about salvation.

This is the secret. This is what pushes you to climb the ladder or the path to the high dive and throw yourself off. The test is that following Jesus means giving up everything that is not love. Knowing this secret, does Nicodemus use the rest of his life to bring others to the eternal life of love?

John hints that he does. We see Nicodemus twice more in his Gospel. Once he argues with the pharisees against arresting Jesus. The text says Nicodemus “was one of them” meaning the disciples. Then Nicodemus appears again on the day after the crucifixion bringing 100 pounds of myrrh to embalm Jesus’ body at the tomb. He was surely one of the Jesus people.

The test for us may be the same as what Nicodemus struggled with. Can we give up the complications of our ordinary lives to pursue love only? Can we reflect on ourselves to uncover what it is we haven’t known that we don’t know about the Spirit and about love? Can we come to know the eternal Jesus who lives in all time at once, beyond and penetrating all space? Who abides in our own breath? Are we ready to jump off that cliff into birth by water and the spirit? The Holy Spirit of Love will hold us as the wind rushes past us all the way down.