

## **Scholarly Scruples**

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Texts: Psalm 121 and John 3: 1-17

“Knowledge is Power!” Yes, I grew up on Schoolhouse Rock and every Saturday morning during cartoons we would get a dose of knowledge that was appropriate for kids like me. It is true that knowledge is critically important. Knowledge of how things work, where things are, how to accomplish a task, even math are important things to know about in life. I would never tell you not to grow your knowledge of all things great and small. At the same time, knowledge does have its limitations. There are things we cannot know, should not know, and ultimately do not know until we have specific experiences or learn from a trusted teacher. Faith is many things, but as our theme for lent reminds us, “Faith is the conviction of things unseen”. Another way to say it is that faith is something we need when our knowledge fails us or falls short.

In our Gospel story today, we are presented with a character we only meet in John’s Gospel, Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin (some conjecture that he was part of an even more esteemed Great Sanhedrin) but suffice it to say that they were the authority on all things religious in the Judaism

of Jesus' day. They were the courts, and just like courts of today, people don't get to be a judge in such a court without great knowledge. Nicodemus was no dummy, and even though this story seems to kind of present him that way, it's not fair to who he very likely was. Perhaps you could say that he was a literalist, and he just didn't catch on to metaphor, but that is not the same as lacking smarts.

He comes to Jesus, presumably in the dark of night, to ask Jesus some very specific questions. People today still take this scripture too literally but follow the story for a minute as Nicodemus is trying to figure out what Jesus means by being "born again" or "born from above". He takes Jesus' words quite literally and asks questions about whether one can re-enter the womb. Seems like strange questions, and of course, no one can literally re-enter the womb and be born again. Patiently, Jesus tries to explain to him what it means to be born again. Really, it means to be born of the Spirit. Jesus is talking things of faith, and Nicodemus is caught up, as Jesus says, "in earthly things." Jesus says, "Are you a teacher and yet you do not understand?"

Knowledge doesn't always lead us on the road of faith. Nicodemus asked an honest question and had trouble understanding the answer. We meet

Nicodemus again and he seems to begin to understand later in the Gospel, but for now he is perplexed and just doesn't quite get it. His literal, very intelligent mind cannot wrap itself around what Jesus is trying to tell him.

Ever been there? I believe all of you to be very knowledgeable. You are not knowledgeable about the same things. Some of you know a great deal about things about which I have no clue. Other times, I know things that you don't know. Not because I'm any smarter, but because I've studied different things and had different experiences. Jesus doesn't shame people for not knowing things. In fact, he is almost always very patient with those who don't know. He gets far more frustrated and angrier with those who think they know but are sadly mistaken.

In fact, in his commentary on this passage, Gerard Sloyan argues that perhaps John is trying to convey that the learned are blocking their faith in Jesus with "death by a thousand qualifications." He goes on to say that "Nothing more can be done to convey the reality of Jesus, especially to a learned class which seems to have a talent for multiplying difficulties." Has our knowledge ever prevented our growth in faith? Has our fear of the unknown kept us from taking a faithful step forward to do something for which we cannot predict the

outcome? Knowledge is power, it's true, but can it also be limiting? Friends, faith requires that we bring our brains, for sure, but that we also allow for mystery. It took Nicodemus time to begin to understand who Jesus was and what he represented. But what he learned added to his knowledge, it wasn't a part of what he brought to the table in the first place.

Author Elizabeth O'Connor told the story of a Christian community organized around two spiritual journeys – the interior one toward knowing the true self and knowing God, and the one directed outward into the world to enact God's justice and love. These two movements comprise the way of Jesus, a continual flow of breath: in, out, out, in, out...

This quest is a mapless journey—there is no single road—the only guides to it are nature, saints, poetry, song, and Spirit. When you dare leave the map behind, Jesus emerges as the road itself and the Light that guides. The Quakers refer to this as “inner light”; medieval mystics speak of Jesus likewise. Of it Meister Eckhart wrote: “There is a journey you must take. It is a journey without destination. There is no map. Your soul will lead you. And you can take nothing with you.” Conventional Christianity (of many different denominations) prefers to see Jesus as a directive or a destination rather than this path; for them “way” is a

noun, not a verb. On the mapless journey, however, all is movement. There is no destination, only the enveloping presence of love.”

The idea of taking a mapless journey probably frightens some of you. It would mean moving forward without knowing for sure exactly where you are headed. Truth is, this is what faith is. It doesn't mean we leave everything we know, or that we don't use our knowledge and our senses along the way, but it does mean that sometimes we must hold our “known facts” at bay while we learn whether those things we believe to be true are true. Sometimes, just like Nicodemus, our knowledge gets in the way of our true understanding and growth. Sometimes it's hard to discern whether to take the step forward in faith, or to trust our knowledge about something. But as O'Connor told us, the way of Jesus Christ is a verb. It is movement, it is constant learning, it is challenging our preconceived notions, and being open to a presence that we can never fully know.

Ultimately, Jesus calls us to a path we can only partially discern. “Follow me,” he says. Do our scholarly scruples get in the way of our actually doing so? The season of Lent is a time of reflection and inner work. Where are we holding ourselves back? What do we fear about stepping into the unknown? Who or

what do we trust when we take a “mapless journey”? Faith is trusting that there is something larger than ourselves, larger than our own minds, larger than the sum of our experiences up to this point, larger...so large that we can never completely understand. That’s what makes faith so difficult for so many.

Good news: Jesus is patient. He is always ready to answer another question. Jesus much more often engaged with someone asking good questions, rather than someone who thought they knew it all. Keep asking. Keep wondering. Keep learning. Faith...a conviction in something (or someone) unseen.”

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.