

HE WHO RESPECTS THE INFANT'S FAITH

John 3:1-17
20 March 2011

Speaking as person who likes stories, books, movies, TV shows, I think that we can agree that good stories have some element of drama in them. What we call news stories, for example, will never include the words, "the Mississippi River remained at the same exact level today as it has been for the last week. This means that everything is perfect for transportation, agriculture and pleasure boating." When the river rises to such an extent that eastern Arkansas is a swimming pool and Riverside drive needs sand bags, there we have a news story. That story has drama, tension and excitement.



We who stay in church circles, then, rarely hear really good conversion stories. We don't often hear them, because we stay among people who are already in the faith. First, church people seldom like to change our minds. We know what the story and we know our interpretation of the story, even if we say that it is not interpretation but "the plain unvarnished truth." Second, to convert seems to be something that ought to happen to outsiders, not we who are in family already. So we seldom hear conversion stories. We most often hear conversion accounts. What is the difference? A conversion account is fairly technical and bloodless. A conversion story is dramatic, has tension and we are not always sure just how it will turn out.

Stories like the conversion of the great evangelist Billy Sunday¹ who left a Chicago bar and told his teammates, "I'm through. I am going to Jesus Christ" are not common in our circles. For that matter, since what sermon in Lent does not have an obligatory reference to some classical saint, what about the conversion story of Augustine² (not John the former member here, but the 5th century North African saint and bishop)? Augustine was a late Roman Empire player to use the modern idiom. One day he heard a child's game where one of the children called, *Tolle, lege*, "pick it up, read it," Augustine opened his Bible, converted, basically on the spot, and became an important bishop and teacher of Christian belief for the past 1500 years. We who stay in mostly Christian circles, and most of us do, seldom hear stories like that.

We can encounter such stories, though. For example, the Robert Duvall film, *The Apostle*,³ tells the story of a spiritually lost evangelist who is converted, instantly and dramatically, from his wayward life to the faith he has preached for so long. The Duvall character's response to his conversion is to drive his new, fully tricked out Lincoln, complete with vanity plates into the river. After that he drives his own body into the river, baptizes himself and emerges a different man altogether. What can be simpler? Still, to die to the old way is a terribly hard step to take. The step is terribly hard even if we know that it is for our incredible and eternal well-being. This difficulty is the context for the story of Jesus and Nicodemus.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Sunday

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine_of_Hippo

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Apostle



Why is Nicodemus up at that hour? Maybe he is studying the Torah. Rabbis, we read, often stayed up late studying scriptures. Possibly his Ambien had worn off. I like Ambien when I need it. Many people go through times in life when sleep is always just out of reach. Nicodemus seems to have been in just such a time. What to think about Jesus, what to do about Jesus was making his mind race when he ought to have been asleep. We can imagine that the stories, and remember stories are always dramatic, about Jesus had reached Nicodemus. “They say he turned water into wine. Someone in the market called him the Messiah, sent from God. Are they right? How can he turn water into wine unless he **is** sent from God? A prophet like the old days? The Messiah we have waited for and wanted? But if he **is** the Messiah why does he come from Galilee? Why has he not studied with any of the famous rabbis? If he **is** the Messiah why do they say that he is so critical of the Temple and the priesthood and the

scribes and us Pharisees? But can anyone who is not sent from God do what he does and say what he says and move the people of faith so much? Maybe I should go and talk to him after all.” With that decision, Nicodemus performs one of the most important acts of turning anyone can ever do. He turns up.

Nicodemus turns up. Just turning up is 80% of success they say. Turning up does not mean that you are only there physically. You must be present to win is the real meaning of turning up. That means you must be there not only physically but mentally, emotionally and spiritually as well. To turn up means to be fully present and totally available to where God promises to meet you, to what God might have for you, want from you. Nicodemus struggles to turn up for the witness of God in Jesus.

When we turn up we claim that God is trustworthy. God so loved the world, we read today. Most of understand that to mean that God loves the world a lot. We think of the word as a measure of amount. That is a perfectly acceptable line of thought. God does love you and the rest of the world a lot. Another translation is equally valid. The ‘so’ in that statement can mean not only the amount of God’s love, but the way God expresses that love for the world.

The musical *Fiddler on the Roof*⁴ is a collection of stories about a mythical Jewish community in Czarist Russia. The hero, a milkman named Tevye is in an arranged marriage to a woman he had never seen until their wedding day. In one scene he sings to Golde his wife, “Do you love me?”⁵ Golde replies Do I love you? For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes. Cooked your meals, cleaned your house. Given you children, milked the cow. After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?” Tevye is insistent. He says "I know... But do you love me?” “Do I love him?” she muses. “For twenty-five years I've lived with him. Fought him,

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiddler_on_the_Roof

⁵ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_y9F5St4j0 (YouTube video of that scene.)

starved with him. Twenty-five years my bed is his. If that's not love, what is?" "Then you love me?" "I suppose I do." "And I suppose I love you too" They end by singing together, "It doesn't change a thing. But even so. After twenty-five years. It's nice to know."

After all the years that you may have spent in church, it may be nice to know that God loves you in this manner. What manner? God loves you so much that he is born in stable, lives and learns and loves and dies like one of us not so that we are condemned but so that we are saved from a life of aimlessness and sin. That is the way and the form of God's love. God's love is given freely to us not to condemn us when we don't live up to its standards. God's love is given freely so that we can be born from above, so we can be born all over and born again to a new way of living, a way that is better, fuller, more rewarding than anything else you can imagine. God shows his love for us, Nicodemus in this way, in this manner. God shows us how to be born afresh, into new life. That is why Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again from above.

Nicodemus continues to turn up in this conversation. This old man, this teacher, this rabbi encounters a young, energetic rabbi of suspect origins. Nicodemus can leave the conversation. He does not. Nicodemus continues to turn up, to enjoy the means of grace. Nicodemus may have chuckled when he responded to Jesus, "How can anyone be born after growing old?" A smile, a laugh that encourages a response rather than dismisses the other person is what I am suggesting should be heard here. At this point I want you to imagine Jesus responding to Nicodemus in a Bronx accent. "Nicodemus, you are a teacher of Israel and yet you don't understand these things?" That is not a put down. That is a friendly nudge spoken with respect. The implication is "Sure, you know what I'm saying here. Think about it."

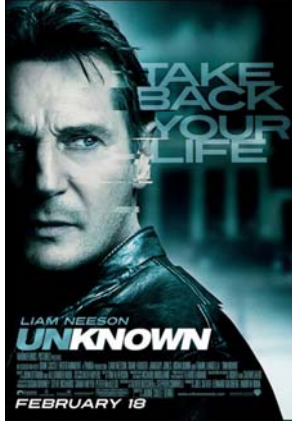
When Nicodemus thinks about it, when we think about it, what do we learn? God loves you. God shows that love for you in this way. Certainly God lives for you but he also dies for you, to rescue you. The expression, the form, of God's love is an expression not of our sin, but the radical, unrestricted and uncontrollable height, depth and breadth of God's love. Rather than see the cross as one more piece of evidence that the lawyers for the prosecution might haul out to be sure and sink our case, convict us and send us off to die as well, that cross gets converted into unrestricted grace, freely offered redemption, a total new life. It is out of love for us, not condemnation of us, that Jesus comes among us, dies for us and saves us. Love, not hate.

We discover God's love when we turn up in the places God promises to meet us. I don't mean that we stumble across a bible or revival or church somewhere. This turning up means we have an intention and a purpose. We turn up at Sunday school and worship because we mean to not by accident. We turn up at St. John's soup kitchen and Lester elementary to feed the hungry and tutor children other people consider surplus. We turn up Wednesday night to participate, Sunday afternoon to help out and any other time and place possible because you know that God is present in this place, in these activities and among these people. We turn up.

Nicodemus turns up. The author of John's gospel tells us of two more times Nicodemus turns up. At Jesus' trial Nicodemus turns up to do the right thing, to bear witness to the truth. His defense of Jesus is a little thin, a bit too little and too late. But he turns up. The last time we read about Nicodemus turning up is after Jesus is dead. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea turn up at the governor's palace and ask to have the body. They want to give Jesus a proper burial.



Nicodemus packs Jesus' body with spices. The evangelist does not mock him for loving too little or too late. The gospel write has respect for the infant faith of this old man who allows himself to be born again from above, all over and a fresh. This is a conversion story that is dramatic. The drama is seen in Nicodemus' life seen from this point on. Drama may be so deep in your soul that the only way for people to see it is in how you act.



A new Liam Neeson film is a secular example of this drama. A researcher is on his way to a conference is in a car accident. His cab plunges into a river. The obvious baptism reference is played out in the rest of the film as Neeson shows his new life not by words, not in the dark, but simple actions of care for those in need and rescue of those unable to rescue themselves. Drama comes in many ways. We who stay in church circles may not see Billy Sunday conversion. Jesus offers you new life though, a chance to turn up in the spiritual disciples and means of grace. No matter your age and life in the faith, new beginning is offered each day and is available when you turn up to the places God promises to meet you. Like Nicodemus, we can all benefit from respect for an infant faith.

They who respect an infant faith protect it, encourage it and help it to grow. Jesus respects the infant faith of Nicodemus. Jesus encourages Nicodemus, rewards him with time, connection, and care. Jesus respects your faith as well, infant, teenager or mature and saintly. God loves the world that way. God loves you that way.