Sermon :: 01-Mar-2026
Lent 2, Year A

" 'not … to *condemn* the world' "

Jim and I are big fans of streaming. We 'cut the cable' a long time ago, and so we don't watch any 'channels' or 'stations' (do they still even *say* "stations" these days?). What we love about this—in addition to the money we save[1]—is that we tend to watch television shows 'longitudinally': that is, over the course of a few months, we'll see *all* the episodes of a single program, in *chronological order*. This telescopes *years*—maybe even more than a *decade*—of plot twists, character developments and shifts-in-theme into the viewing-space of just a few *months*.

One thing you notice when you watch like this[2] is a show's *recurring characters*. They're not on every week … maybe only once or twice a *season* … but when they *are,* there's a moment of recognition … of familiarity … of remembering the *last* time you saw them and wondering why they've appeared *now*. For you SEINFELD fans, think of Newman ("Hello, Newman") or George's father Frank ("Serenity now!"). Before he got his own show, Gomer Pyle was a recurring character on THE ANDY GRIFFITH SHOW.[3] And perhaps a longevity award of some sort might go to Dr Sydney Freedman, the psychiatrist on M*A*S*H, who shows up across *ten* of the series' eleven seasons[4] … including his pivotal role treating Hawkeye's collapse in the series' legendary finale.

I'll stop now … lest I unwittingly absorb you into my web of useless television trivia … but I *started* down this rabbit hole because … believe it or not … today we get introduced to one of the 'recurring characters' in the Gospel according to St John: Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a *pharisee:* one of the Jewish authorities of his day ¶who interpret the *ancient* laws of Judaism—dating back to Moses' time—for the *current* age; ¶who seek to keep Judaism alive and protected vis-à-vis the Roman occupiers and their Jewish minions; ¶who hold great popular sway over the Jewish community—especially in and around *Jerusalem*—at the time of Jesus' ministry; and most importantly for us, ¶who uniformly *reject* … *oppose* … and seek to *limit* (or elimi*nate*) Jesus as the Messiah.

But *then* … there's *Nicodemus*. He appears *three times* in John's gospel. We get his first, and also longest, appearance *today*. Nicodemus steals into Jesus' room, under the cover of darkness, for a discussion. After Jesus mentions being "born again from above"—that is, in *faith*—Nicodemus is bewildered. His mind can't grasp the notion of a *spiritual* re-birth. Even after Jesus explains it (a bit), Nicodemus still asks, "How can these things *be?*" And although we don't hear anymore *from* Nicodemus during this first encounter … I'm *fairly* certain he sticks around to hear some of the most famous—most *comforting;* most *reassuring;* most *hopeful*—words Jesus ever utters:

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[1] In truth, part of what we got fed up with was how much of our annual shell-out for CATV went to sports programming that we never, ever watched.

[2] *I.e.,* diachronically: that is, 'across time'; as opposed to synchronically, which focuses on a specific period in time (*e.g.,* a single season).

[3] True Trekkies know that both Chekhov and Sulu were really more recurring than regular: There were often other folks in 'their' seats on the bridge of the *Enterprise*. (I drop this footnote here because STAR TREK was produced by Desilu, the same company that backed ANDY GRIFFITH. Yes, I know too much about vintage television!)

[4] He's absent only from Season 1.

> "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that *everyone* who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life.
>
> "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to *condemn* the world but in order that the world, *through* Him, might be *saved*."

Whether or not Jesus' 'wild-eyed' notions of being born again, from above, *ever* make sense to Nicodemus[5] … still, JOHN 3:16—the *one* Bible verse *everyone* can cite!—seems to make an impact on Nicodemus. For the *next* time we encounter him, several chapters later, he's in a high-level meeting with other pharisees, the chief priests from the Jewish Temple and leaders of the Temple police (Jn 7:45-52). They are practically beside themselves because Jesus is roaming the streets of Jewish Jerusalem and preaching 'nonsense' that threatens to upend the established order of things. They want Jesus arrested and silenced, by any means possible. Then, out of the blue, Nicodemus stands up for Jesus' rights as a Jew: Under *our* law, Nicodemus observes, we can't act against this man without a *hearing*—we can't just lock [H]im away and shut [H]im down! Nicodemus' colleagues, however, brush him back: sneeringly—and *smear*ingly—asking him whether maybe *he's* from Galilee, *too* … just like this no-good rebel making all the trouble.

Finally, and most tenderly, Nicodemus' *last* appearance in John occurs just after Jesus' death on the Cross. Nicodemus brings with him more than seventy *pounds* of burial spices and ointments: truly, an *eye*-popping (not to mention *wallet*-draining) tribute, fit for no one less than a *king*. Along with a man named Joseph,[6] Nicodemus anoints Jesus' brutally tortured body for burial and lays it to rest, in a new tomb (Jn 19:38-42).

Whatever Nicodemus may have thought about Jesus and His crazy teachings, at *first* … whatever standing Nicodemus *had,* or sought to *maintain,* among the Jewish HOI POLLOI … by the time of Jesus' earthly death … Nicodemus has *come around*. The *lavish* devotion … the risk to his *own* reputation … the singled-minded *selfless*ness … of his burying Jesus … all suggest that at least *something* of what Jesus *stood* for, had *done* and had *taught* … now makes *sense*—perhaps *life-changing* sense—to Nicodemus. Therefore, Nicodemus-the-pharisee makes sure that the body of Jesus-the-outlaw receives a *royal* (if secret) burial: a burial fit for the *king* Jesus *is* … but Nicodemus cannot say *out loud*.[7]

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By any measure of the day … by any calculus of social standing or religious authority or even sheer self-preservation … Nicodemus—a pharisee—*should* have regarded Jesus as an *OPPONENT:* as someone who didn't believe what *Nicodemus* believed … who was stirring up the people against Nicodemus' *own* interests … who may even have been a heretic or an apostate, trying to turn the Jewish people *away* from their God and God's covenant. Nicodemus had every reason to *doubt* Jesus … *discourage* Jesus … even *distrust* Jesus. And, at *first,* maybe he *did*. Because he's only a *recurring* character, we don't get much of his inner thinking and motivation.

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[5] They have no real antecedent in the core Jewish tradition, outside the (relatively rare) context of Gentile conversions to Judaism, which were / are seen as a form of spiritual rebirth. But the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus takes place between two from-birth Jews.

[6] *I.e.,* of Arimathea.

[7] I can't make the definitive (inferential) leap that Nicodemus becomes a follower of Jesus. There just isn't enough evidence in the text for this. But it is surely a *possibility*.

But what *is* abundantly clear is that Nicodemus did not *hate* Jesus: did not "hate [his] OPPONENT" … did not "not want the best for" him, as we recently heard one of this nation's leaders preach at a high-profile funeral.[8]

- Nicodemus *sought out* his 'OPPONENT.' He *engaged* Jesus in *challenging,* but *respectful, dialogue;* asked Him *pointed,* but *sincere, questions*—questions aimed at *bridging* whatever divided them … rather than at scoring *points* of popularity or fanning *flames* of division.

- Nicodemus *defended* the *rights* of his 'OPPONENT.' While he didn't (necessarily) *defend* Jesus' message among his own colleagues … neither did he go along with their tearing it *down,* willy-nilly. Nicodemus didn't argue that his OPPONENT deserved any *more* rights than anyone else … but neither was he willing to accept his OPPONENT'S being afforded any *fewer*. The bus was loaded, and his comrades were revving the engine … but Nicodemus wasn't willing to throw his OPPONENT *under* it.

- Nicodemus *respected* his 'OPPONENT's' life and *grieved* the sorrow—not to mention the *ugliness*—of how it was ended. There were both *religious* reasons (it was the beginning of the holy days of Passover) and *practical* reasons (what if someone *saw* him tending to the body of an *outlaw?* of a *"seditious traitor"?*[9]) for Nicodemus to stay as far away from Jesus' dead body as possible. But his *compassion* … his core *humanity* … and, just *maybe,* his *understanding* of and *remorse* for the role he *himself* may have played in Jesus' death—however indirectly; however 'by-association' … … perhaps all this not only brought Nicodemus *to* his OPPONENT's funeral … but, indeed, prompted him to *provide* it. There were no microphones to capture the words Nicodemus uttered that first Good Friday evening … but, I dare say, *"hate"* was nowhere among them.

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I *was* conscious, as I *wrote* this sermon … and *am* conscious, as I'm *preaching* it … that it may sound more like a paean to a pharisee rather than a study of our Savior. But I can't help thinking that the message—the *JOHN 3:16* message—Nicodemus heard that night in Jesus' room … echoed—*poignantly; exquisitely; challengingly*—across the *rest* of his *life:* God *loves* all, *no exceptions*. God *cares* for all, *no exceptions*. In *Me,* Jesus says, God seeks to *save* all, *no exceptions*. Regardless of whether Nicodemus ever came to understand being "born again, from above" … or ever accepted Jesus as the Messiah … he *heard* Jesus say that night was that there is no place in God's heart for *hatred* … no space in God's plan for *subjective* 'justice' … no taste in God's mouth for *terror,* whether physical or verbal.

It was a lesson the character Nicodemus learned so well, that he was invited back for several more 'appearances.'

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[8] https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/21/us/elections/trump-charlie-kirk-memorial-service.html (accessed Feb 16, 2026).

[9] https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/a-primer-on-treason-seditious-conspiracy-and-the-constitution (accessed Feb 16, 2026). Editorial disclosure: I have edited together "seditious" and "traitor," but I don't think that's a leap. According to the cited article, "President Trump called [his opponents'] statements 'SEDITIOUS BEHAVIOR' in three separate posts. He also claimed, 'Each one of these traitors to our Country should be ARRESTED AND PUT ON TRIAL,' and that seditious behavior was 'punishable by DEATH!'" (block caps in original).

It's *also* a lesson too important … too *fundamentally Jesus …* for the biggest *'characters'* of *our* day—who wave their Christianity around like some 'team merch' at a ballgame … *not* to learn … before *their* show collapses under the loveless weight of their own loathing.

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