

Late-night seminar: John 3:1-17

## **Portrayed as a cowardly dolt, Nicodemus is usually spotted skulking about under cover of darkness.**

by [Patricia Farris](#) in the [January 30, 2002](#) issue

We are a nation of spiritual seekers. We are hungry to learn about the life of the spirit, although many of us hesitate to translate that hunger into institutional allegiance. The majority of us are “unchurched.” Others are drawn to “seekers’ churches.” Still others are exploring the life of the spirit within a denomination and a tradition. For all of us, Jesus’ meeting with Nicodemus is powerful, for Jesus sees the longing in his heart, recognizes a sincere seeker, and responds with compassion.

We might, in fact, call Nicodemus the Patron Saint of Seekers. After all, there are patron saints for travelers, bakers, doctors, artists, fathers, soldiers, teachers, lawyers and almost every kind of vocation and avocation imaginable. As a lifelong Methodist, I was not brought up to value such holy protection. But a year as an exchange student living with a Catholic family in France opened me to a wealth of spiritual resources. Perhaps if seekers did their seeking under the protection of a patron saint, those of us already in the pews might more easily recognize that Nicodemus is a fellow traveler and a kindred spirit, someone to be embraced.

Instead, poor Nick usually gets a bad rap. He is reduced to a foil, contrasting with and enhancing Jesus’ obvious superiority. Portrayed as a cowardly dolt, Nicodemus is usually spotted skulking about under cover of darkness. He is a Pharisee ready to betray his brothers—to the delight of Christians near and far. His pharisaic training seems to trap him in the minutiae of the law. And we can never seem to decide: is he too smart for his own good? Or is he, in fact, an embarrassment to his kind, too dimwitted to understand about being born again?

In contrast to our derision, Jesus receives Nicodemus as a pilgrim, a sincere religious seeker. Jesus welcomes him and his searching mind. Jesus immediately senses that

this learned Pharisee, this member of the religious establishment—Judge Nicodemus, His Honor Nicodemus—is responding to something in Jesus’ teaching. He seems to know that Nicodemus is willing to risk leaving behind the truth as he has known it in order to explore something new. Jesus invites him into a new realm of insight, and takes Nicodemus seriously even as he pushes him far beyond his comfort zone. Recognizing a spiritual pilgrim who is starting down a path, Jesus seeks not to embarrass Nicodemus, nor condemn him, but to offer him, instead, the possibility of new life.

What are the clues to Nicodemus’s true quest? While it’s often said that Nicodemus meets Jesus at night to avoid being seen in this illicit liaison, an alternate interpretation is more instructive. The rabbis had taught that the Torah was best studied at night when it was quiet and the distractions of the day had subsided. Nicodemus uses his precious study time to expand his search beyond the standard texts. In this view, Jesus himself becomes the book into which Nicodemus delves, mining every word for wisdom and understanding.

Nicodemus opens the class with a remarkable affirmation of faith: “Teacher [rabbi], we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these miracles except by the power of God.” Skilled teachers know that eager students learn most easily, and Jesus recognizes this one right away. Immediately Jesus ushers this seeker into a realm of wisdom that is more complex, deep and rich than anything Nicodemus has known. Using language that is poetic, metaphorical, suggestive and imaginative, Jesus talks of being born from above. The same words work on three levels: born a second time, remade completely, born from on high.

Like most of us, Nicodemus the Seeker is limited by the familiar “word world,” the world he knows best. He responds in his best left-brain, legal-scholar, word-parsing mode. He sees tricks, deadends and practical impossibilities. It is all he knows how to see. Yet Jesus persists from his right-brain, heart vocabulary, with fertile images of wind, spirit and expansive love.

We do not know how long Nicodemus dwells in this liminal space between worlds, moving back and forth between what is familiar to him—the world where his status is recognized and esteemed and his worldview reliable—and this new world of life everlasting on the wings of the wind of love. Later we are told that he lands on the other side. When we see him again he is accompanying Joseph of Arimathea to the darkness of Jesus’ tomb, and offering his beloved teacher gifts of precious ointment,

aloes and myrrh. Nicodemus is pursuing the path that begins in the darkness of the womb, is continually reborn in the dark night of the soul, and ends, on this earth, in the darkness of the tomb. Nicodemus has begun to learn of the Savior's baptism of death and resurrection, transfigured by Spirit into eternal life.

The Word made flesh becomes Nicodemus's text, and the living water of the Torah an ever-expanding pool of wisdom. His ancestors knew God's visitations in visions and songs of the night, full of treasures and richness. Now Nicodemus studies by night, and finds assurance, acceptance and a challenge.

Nicodemus. Patron Saint of Seekers. May he protect the seeker in each of us from condemnation and condescension. May he guide seekers' steps in the way that leads to eternal life. May he place us in the company of compassionate teachers whose love defines a new community of hope and grace. May he give us courage to dare to love God with heart, mind, soul and strength.