

Keep Jesus weird

It's no surprise that Nicodemus goes home befuddled. If discipleship doesn't come with some confusion, it probably isn't Jesus you're following.

Sunday's Coming Premium

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Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Nicodemus and Jesus on a Rooftop*, oil on canvas, 1899

A pastor once lost a couple of prospective church members when he refused to let them have their wedding exactly the way they wanted. They told him, “Well, we were thinking of joining your church before *this* happened.”

We often live in fear of those moments, moments when we may lose people or turn them off. Because of that we sometimes bend over backward to please people, desperate to make them feel welcome and eager to postpone or avoid any

conversation about what the gospel or a church commitment might require of them.

Whenever I think about this tendency toward discipleship dilution, I think about Nicodemus and his evening encounter with Jesus.

Nicodemus slips out during the night and taps at Jesus' door. Maybe they end up sitting in the kitchen, sipping hot tea, just the two of them. The first words out of the mouth of Nicodemus are words of flattery. "Gosh, rabbi, you're one heck of a teacher. Nobody could do what you do without a powerful connection to God. You're the real thing, man." Nicodemus is obviously interested in learning more about Jesus.

But watch what Jesus does, or maybe what Jesus doesn't do. He could've invited Nicodemus to the equivalent of a church picnic the next afternoon to meet some nice Christians. He could have acknowledged Nicodemus's compliments and played up his own heavenly credentials. He could have talked about exactly how many new followers were traveling with him those days. And he could have handed Nicodemus a nice multicolored brochure that would summarize his teachings in five nonthreatening, easily remembered points.

Jesus does none of these things. Jesus ignores the flattery and goes straight for the theological jugular to talk about conversion. In the contemporary mainline, we tend to woo and patiently court newcomers; we give them plenty of space and assure them that what they're getting into won't be too strange or odd or demanding. As a pastor, I'm careful to use my best manners when I enter anyone's home. Maybe this is respect for the person I'm visiting. Or maybe it's because I don't want to scare anybody away from joining our church.

Jesus doesn't seem to care a whole lot about this. He never tries to water down the truth for Nicodemus or dilute the strangeness of what it means to be a follower. As a result, Nicodemus is entirely baffled. After Jesus talks about rebirth by water and spirit, Nicodemus asks, "How can these things be?" Our Lord doesn't seem all that moved by the man's confusion. "I thought you were supposed to be a teacher, pal," Jesus says. "Looks to me like you need to go back to school."

This is a regular teaching style for Jesus. Instead of making things easier and clearer, he muddies the water, so that when Nicodemus leaves Jesus' apartment that night he goes home shaking his head. It seems that following Jesus leads first to befuddlement and only later to clarity and insight. If some confusion doesn't come

with the experience, it's likely not Jesus whom the disciple is following.

Trying to share the basics of the faith can be a challenge. In his book *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, David Sedaris recalls enrolling in a beginning French language class that was attended by people from all over the world. One day the conversation turned toward Christianity. A Moroccan woman wanted to know what the word *Easter* meant. A Polish woman took a stab at explaining resurrection theology: "He call his self Jesus and then he die one day on two . . . morsels of . . . lumber." Sedaris reports: "The rest of the class jumped in, offering bits of information that would have given the pope an aneurysm."

The early church expected new converts to be caught up in study, confusion, and personal change. Yet churches forgo this part of the welcome, and many newcomers seem unwilling to spend time in Christian formation. Jesus doesn't intend to be instantly accessible and understandable. He *wants* us to scratch our heads and feel a little out of step and off-center; he even uses a teaching style resembling intentional obfuscation (Matt. 13:10–15). Our first response to Jesus may well be that we want him to go away.

In Luke 5 Peter does just that. Suddenly blessed with two boatloads of fish, Peter essentially says, "Go away, Lord. Get out of here." You'd expect: "Thank you, Lord!" from a grateful fisherman who has tons of tilapia to take to market. But Peter wants Jesus to leave. Perhaps we should take his rejection more seriously. *Get out of here, God*. Why would he say such a thing?

Peter's invitation for Jesus to hit the road expresses our own tendency to try and manage God in our lives—you may enter *this* aspect of my life, but please, not that one. Over here, but Lord above, please—not over there.

We pastors and other Christian leaders should be challenged if we try to hoodwink people into thinking that the faith is something less than it is. We should be very careful about removing everything about Jesus that is weird or strange or off-putting because we want to be evangelically inclusive, hospitable, and welcoming.

Gordon Cosby once addressed this in an interview with *Sojourners*:

If a community is going to have a life which is an alternative life to the dominant culture and the dominant consciousness, then it must clearly define what its corporate life is and is not about. It must clearly prepare people who want to

explore that life and who are making the transition from noncommunity to community life.

I've seen that transition happen in a pediatric surgeon whom I'll call Jonathan. Jonathan started attending Sunday worship at our congregation a couple of years ago. A man with a brilliant and probing mind, he was impatient with clergy bromides or pat theological answers. A voracious reader, Jonathan explored topics well beyond his vocational focus.

Jonathan needed more than a typical new member orientation and a handshake of welcome. He'd been baptized as a child but was intellectually and theologically restless in congregational life. Jonathan signed up for our adult catechumenal ministry, an eight-month process based on the rhythms of the church year. The ministry hearkens back to the early church, when adults preparing for baptism were expected to complete three years of preparation and study prior to being received into the church by water and Spirit at the Great Vigil of Easter.

The catechumenate consists of four stages: inquiry, welcome, deeper formation, and gift discernment. No question is off-limits. Participants are required to write a spiritual autobiography (discussed at length with other group members) and to experiment with a variety of spiritual disciplines. On Pentecost, the group members stand in front of the congregation and talk about where God is calling them into ministry. Jonathan felt called to begin a monthly lecture-discussion series at the church, one that included a fascinating array of specialists as speakers. Today the initiative is thriving, and Jonathan's enthusiasm for Jesus is contagious.

We hear from Nicodemus two more times. When the Pharisees become increasingly agitated about Jesus, Nicodemus stands up and defends Jesus publicly. "You can't judge this man without giving him a fair trial," he says. This doesn't go over well. Later, after Jesus has died, Nicodemus comes forward with a hundred pounds of spices, anoints and wraps Jesus' body, and helps place it in a tomb—a risky, edgy gesture.

By the end of John's Gospel, Nicodemus has come a long way from that first evening encounter with Jesus. In fact, by the end of the Gospel he's fully out of the closet as a disciple.

I wonder if Nicodemus would have found this bravery and poise in his faith if Jesus had talked about the weather or handed him an evangelism tract—anything to avoid

bringing up the radical transformation into becoming a follower of Jesus.