

# Give Me Your Hand

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Today's story about Nicodemus is one of my favorites. When I tell it, I will often play it up with an emphasis on the mysterious nature of events:

“The streets were dark and deserted. Not a soul could be seen...at least Nicodemus hoped not. He was one lonely figure, jumping from shadow to shadow, careful to not use the major streets of the town, travelling only in out of the way places, hoping not to be seen. If his friends could have seen him, they would have wondered: “Just what is he doing, jumping from shadow to shadow in the middle of the night...?” (*adapted from Eugene Lowry 1990:78; Lowry, E. L. 1990. “Strangers in the night” in W. B. Robinson (ed) Journeys Toward Narrative Preaching. NY: New York. The Pilgrim press.*)

I am tempted to begin the story with, “**It was a dark and stormy night...**” to really play up the drama, and if I am not careful, it is easy to see and portray Nicodemus as shifty and unreliable—a narrow-minded, left brain, literalist, a person with virtually no redeeming characteristics except to provide Jesus with the opportunity to say those phrases we love to hear and speak: “God so loved the world...”

But my own personal theological journey has always encouraged me to take a second look at Nicodemus. I invite you to hear Nicodemus' story today as that of a pilgrim; a sincere religious seeker...a student who uses his precious study time to expand his search beyond the standard texts and distractions of the day. I invite you to also hear Nicodemus, a member of the religious institution of his day, as a mover of theological boundaries, willing to risk leaving behind the so-called ‘truth’ as he and his colleagues have known it, in order to explore something new.

So instead of questioning his motives, as I feel many writers—and I myself—have done on other occasions, I reckon Nicodemus' motives need to be recognized as both open and honorable. For Nicodemus—and for all of us—we must be allowed to respond to ‘the new’ or ‘the different’ in a variety of ways rather than prescribing a single response. How else can he and we discover that our lives and our thinking might be different?

Think of it: Nicodemus, the Patron Saint of the Curious; no longer does that title belong only to Thomas (as in “Doubting Thomas”)! And for many of us, someone who questions and reflects on new ideas is ideal as our patron saint; we look to those like Nicodemus who encourage us to do the hard work of questioning and growing our faith in such a way that we better understand God's kin-dom. In such times as these, may Nicodemus protect the curious in each one of us...

For the last several years I have had the pleasure of going with Nebraska Wesleyan Students on a Spring Break Mission Trip. The trip has carried the same name as today's sermon: “Give Me Your Hand.” This title was inspired by a passage from the Bible as interpreted by John Wesley, the founder of what is today The United Methodist Church. In a sermon concerned with unity, and entitled *A Catholic Spirit* (catholic is the sense of “universal”), John Wesley states: “If your heart is as my heart,” if you love God and all [hu]mankind, I ask no more: “Give me your hand.”

A primary objective for the NWU GMYH trips is to affirm a key concept within the history of the United Methodist Church: the “unity” of “community.” We may not always agree with one another on individual points, but if we are of one heart and mind on the big picture, then we must reach out to one another in common care.

For John Wesley, giving one's hand to another was a first step toward social holiness or living out the message of the ultimate lesson of the Gospels. For us on these various trips, the more diverse the religious beliefs of participants and partners were, the richer the insight and exploration we experienced. At the end of the day when we reflected on our experiences, different questions were asked and the answers given were understood in different ways. The guiding principle inherent in the phrase, "Give me your Hand," encourages people to put in perspective any potentially paralyzing theological or religious differences and allowed us to advocate for societal change through diverse opportunities for compassionate service together.

While John Wesley wrote his sermon in a very different time than we are living in today, the belief that undergirds his thought on the topic of religious differences is to find what is most basic to our faith and agree to that—if to nothing else. That is part of why I was taken aback by the inability of the delegates at General Conference to come to agreement even on the statement that people of good faith agree to disagree on a variety of topics, but most particularly on the issue of homosexuality and how we address it in our congregations. In my mind, an unwillingness to even agree to this minimal statement flies in the face of what Wesley expressed in one of his most famous sermons. Where is the room to question and explore our faith in light of such a move? Must we only come to ask Jesus questions in the dark of night?

Cathleen Falsani, web editor and director of new media for Sojourners magazine, blogged: "Ah, the life of the church. So many arguments, so little time." She goes on to list a variety of topics upon which we, in the larger Christian Church, disagree:

"The ordination of women. The proper role of religion in politics. Climate change. Homosexuality and same-sex unions. Pre-, post-, or a-millennialism. Biblical translation. Gender pronouns for God. How best to aid the poorest of the poor. How best to support the sanctity of marriage. Hell. Heaven. Baptism. Which brand of fair-trade coffee to serve in the fellowship hall. The use of "trespasses" or "debts/debtors" in reciting the Lord's Prayer. Whether to use wafers, pita, home-baked organic wheat, gluten-free or bagels at the communion table. [the nature of the Trinity]..."

It should come as no surprise to most Christians that the world outside the church looking in sees it filled with conflict and disagreement. But it really should not come as a surprise to any of us "that the church — by virtue of being a community of humans — naturally would have such disagreements and discord. We are imperfect. Our communities are imperfect. And our faith, too, is imperfect." (Falsani) "

In [his recent post on God's Politics](#), Gary L. Tandy, a professor of English and chair of the English Department at George Fox University, wrote about the "problem of certitude" in the life of the church."

"There is a cultural tendency in evangelical Christianity that does not leave room for 'evolving' positions, complexity, uncertainty, or doubt. Rather the assumption seems to be that every Christian should have a clearly defined position on every social issue and even that for some issues there's only one acceptable position to take," Tandy wrote. "When discussing these controversial issues as Christians, can we exercise enough humility to temper our statements? Can we resist the temptations of certitude, realizing that it draws lines in the sand and reinforces stereotypes that non-Christians already carry about those of our ilk? Can we learn the use of conditional phrases like 'Based on my understanding of scripture' or even 'I might be wrong about this' or, God forbid, 'my views on this are evolving'? Can we remember Anne Lamott's friend, Father Tom, who suggests that the opposite of faith is certainty?"

John Wesley said: “If your heart is as my heart,” I ask no more: “Give me your hand.” We call it “Holy Conferencing,” a practice of listening to what another has to say...acknowledging that you have heard it...that you respect the person speaking...that you love them as a child of God...and then speaking the truth as you have experienced it, speaking with humility and an openness to new understanding.

Nicodemus came to Jesus wanting to understand the new things that he was seeing in how Jesus interacted with God and others. He came to ask questions...and when he leaves, we do not know whether or not he has heard anything that has helped him to understand. However, we hear of Nicodemus two other times in the Gospel of John: the first time is when he questions other Pharisees about how people are judged under the Law, and the second is when he comes to care for Jesus’ body following his death. I see in these brief references to Nicodemus that he has continued to question and continues on a path of seeking. This is the kind of Christian that I want to be.

The front of our bulletin proclaims today to be both Trinity Sunday and Peace with Justice Sunday. I have preached on it as though it is a feast day for a patron saint named Nicodemus. But I also found reference to today being proclaimed as “All Heretics Day.” I am indebted to a Unitarian pastor, Rev. Jo Lane, for both the information and encouragement to celebrate ‘All Heretic’s Day’ today.

For many who name ourselves as Progressive Christians we occasionally brand ourselves honorably with the title ‘heretic’ because we seek to be reformers, questioners, and seekers; we sometimes defy the religious conventions of our times and work to blaze new pathways of understanding. We join with heretics that dared to say that the earth is round, and that our planet is not the center of the universe. We proclaim that we are part of a larger community called “God’s Creation” and we look at the vast expanse of the universe and at the tiniest particles yet to be named. We recognize that all things are relative in our current understanding and the world is colored in many colors and shades of gray rather than being painted black and white.

Trinity, Peace with Justice, and Heretic Sunday. All of these titles are invitations to be curious about life and theology, to rethink our long-held assumptions with an altered perspective. We are invited not to just conduct an autopsy on our past, but to look to the future through the eyes of new possibility. Jesus tells Nicodemus that we must be born from above...we must be born again.

Think of that. An invitation to be born anew! To consider how life might be different, if only...? What a gift for those who seek to understand who Jesus is for us today. With delight...and with questions on my lips...I say: “Give me your hand!”

May this day place us in the company of earnest and compassionate teachers whose openness defines a new community of hope and grace as traditional theological boundaries are pushed, and pushed again, with honesty and creativity. Thanks be to God! Amen.