

My sister-in-law is a speech and language pathologist who helps children to learn to speak clearly. I've learned from her that there is more science to speech than I thought. When the whole process of speaking is broken down, there are dozens, maybe hundreds, of little rules that have to come together to create clear speech. While some of us can somehow absorb and synthesize all these little steps on a subconscious level and learn to speak clearly on our own, some people need have the process broken down and taught to them – so that they can master each little step – each rule. They need to notice, for example, where their tongue sits in relationship to their teeth and lips when they say an R sound or an S sound. They need to learn when a C sounds hard or soft, and what's happening in their throat when they say it each way. But of course, my sister-in-law's ultimate goal as a speech teacher is not just to teach her students to master all these individual rules – but to reach the point of fluency. The goal is to ultimately be able to forget all those little rules and just speak, flowingly and effortlessly.

The Pharisees, and any teachers of faith, then or now, do with faith what my sister-in-law does with language. We break down the big picture into little moments, little chunks, for people to look at, chew on and gradually assimilate into their own lives of faith. While it is perhaps possible that some people receive full and deep faith all at once in a sudden conversion, for most of us, faith is a process, something that is built one experience, one insight at a time in a lifelong journey that St. Benedict called our “conversion of life.” Faith is not something we can ever master – or ever be able to control – we can only dive in and swim in it and experience the feeling of the endless ocean of God around us from our own unique position in it all.

But because this swim can be sometimes unnerving – like floating alone out in the middle of the ocean for any length of time would be unnerving – those who swim in faith, priests or theologians, ministers or Pharisees, televangelists or lay people, can sometimes get so focused on the little rules and laws and steps of faith that we forget about the larger picture. It is easy to get preoccupied with the details of such a big subject, because rules and details are small, graspable, controllable and safe. Unfortunately, the rules and laws can sometimes take the place of faith, and we can try to fit what is profound and without limit into boxes that are very limited – shrunken down to human size. This is certainly the problem that many of the Pharisees of Jesus' time had fallen into. It is a problem that many of us today have – even here in the Episcopal Church. In fact, I think we all fall prey to trying to put God into a neat little box at times.

So Nicodemus the Pharisee had a problem. He recognized that although he was quite conversant, as his colleagues were, with the intricacies of the law and the finer points of theology, he was not really fluent in faith. He knew every little part of the whole tradition inside and out, and could probably even recite huge chunks of it from memory, but the harmony of the whole was eluding him. I imagine that when Nicodemus heard Jesus speak and saw how he interacted with the crowds, he had feelings like the composer Salieri did when he first heard Mozart. He knew he had completely mastered the skills and techniques of his religion, but recognized that he didn't have the true music of faith saturating his very being like this Jesus obviously did. Jesus shed a light on his areas of poverty within, and a desire was sparked within him to try and discover how he could fill that hole in himself. So Nicodemus, unlike some of his colleagues, who were trying to figure out how to get rid of Jesus rather than face their own holes, instead left the comfort of his tradition of rules and laws and ventured out into the dark of night to find out more for himself. He went to Jesus, and said to him, “No one could do what you do without God. You must be a teacher from God.” But it seems to me as if Nicodemus was really asking if Jesus might actually be something more than just a teacher. I can almost hear him thinking, “I'm a teacher. You're more than a teacher. You're the real deal. No one could be who you are without God.”

Jesus can see that Nicodemus is searching for something he doesn't even have words for. So he tells him that if he truly wants to see the Kingdom of God – if he wants to swim in the deep pool of faith – he'll have to go beyond the comfort of the rules. He'll need to be born from above. Nicodemus' natural inclination is to hear these words very literally – very simplistically at first – like a little box. Born from above? How can someone go back into the womb again to be born a second time? Patiently, Jesus explains that he doesn't mean to be literally born again. He means

to begin a new life of living in a new way. There is a different way of being that leads to the kingdom of God. Faith is not about what you do or what you think. It's about recognizing who you are – and then becoming that more. In safe little boxes of rules and laws, you are in control. But, just as the wind blows where it chooses, and although you hear the sound of it, you can't understand where it comes from or where it is going, Grace comes from God in God's own time, not our own. And faith comes, not from following the letter of the literal law, but from faith – believing that God is with you – that God is your shade from the sun, your moon in the dark, the one who keeps you from evil and is right there with you in your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore. And it is believing this not just in the head sense, but living as if it were already true, as if you trusted God utterly and completely. It is knowing at a gut level that God has given his own flesh and blood to you – to you – so that you will not perish but will have eternal life. That is what it means to be born from above – coming into a liberated life in which you are fully what God made you to be and ever becoming what God wants you to become. How strange, Jesus says, here you are, one of the teachers of God's chosen people and you do not understand these things.

But is it so strange? Are any of us any different from Nicodemus – who is out searching in the dark for something that is already right in front of him? Wandering around in the middle of the night trying to trust what he already knows? Wanting to hold on to the many controllable and understandable rules and laws of religion instead of diving into the joy and freedom and fluency of a trusting faith?

We all, like Nicodemus, trust ourselves more than we trust God. We trust our education, our own experiences, our own judgment, our own abilities, the things we've figured out, our systems, our institutions, our dogmas and traditions – we trust ourselves – more than anything else. That is why Abraham is always held up to us as the father of our faith. Because Abraham followed God before anything else. Before even his own judgment. He left a valuable piece of inherited land and everything familiar to him including family, to pack up and set out for who knows where when he was 75 years old – just because God told him to. Later on in the book of Genesis, he almost sacrifices his only son with a knife because God told him to. This is more obedience than most of us would be able – or want – to muster, I think. But give him this: Abraham trusted God so thoroughly and so completely, he was able to follow God in impossible ways, and because of this, he inherited the whole world.

God is always waiting to bestow upon us grace upon grace – more than all the stars in the heavens – and is inviting us into the deep pool of faith, of relationship, of mystery, and of love. Can we, like Abraham, trust God enough to let God steer our lives? Can we, like Nicodemus, venture out into the darkness, into the unknown, going beyond our own comfort zones to discover who Jesus really is to us? Can we, like Paul, throw off the yoke of the law that keeps us enslaved and devote every fiber of our beings to a faith that heals, transforms and saves? For indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Thanks be to God.