

## Holy Moliere

<sup>NRS</sup> Joh 3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> "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.

What on earth was he doing there? What was Nicodemus doing in Jesus' camp under the cover of darkness? A Pharisee visiting Jesus- this was like a cat showing up at a canary convention. What was he doing? What was he thinking?

I don't think Nicodemus himself knew, really. He was fascinated by Jesus. He could tell something was going on with Jesus that was different, was real. But he also wasn't stupid. Jesus was a young man, with no credentials. And he insisted on rocking the boat. He was a danger- a danger to himself and anyone close to him.

So what was he doing there?

Nicodemus is such a complicated character for the church. Our hero is Jesus, of course- and the disciples are our model. When we hear the stories of the Bible, we're

supposed to identify with these fishermen who threw their nets away and followed after Jesus. And we know we don't always do a great job of this all the time- but of course they didn't either. But, we say, the important thing isn't that we're perfect, but we're trying.

And the bad guys in these stories are the religious leaders- the theologians and pastors of the day who have all the answers, who are all law and no grace. Our villains are these well dressed pastors, with degrees from impressive seminaries who *know* all *about* God but seem to have very little *experience* of God, along with their oh-so-religious church members, who are so confident they know the mind of God they've got their pockets full of stones and their eyes peeled for sin. Jesus calls them white washed tombs- they look so nice on the outside, so polished, so pretty; but so empty on the inside, full of nothing but death.

And the Gospels are so stark- so black on white. Are you a disciple, or are you a white washed tomb, they ask? The Gospels make us uncomfortable, and they should. This is their purpose.

They're designed to make everything so neat and clear cut.

But then what the heck are we supposed to do with Nicodemus? Where does he fit? Where does he belong?

He's certainly not a disciple. This is clear. John calls him a Pharisee throughout the Gospel- this never changes. He never switches sides. He never converts. He never leaves the dark side.

But, he's not much of a Pharisee, either, is he? Here he is in the middle of the night seeking Jesus out- and not to kill him but to talk to him, to learn from him really.

That's not a good sign. And this isn't the only time Nicodemus shows up in John, either. Later, in Chapter 7 there's this huge festival going on. And Jesus is teaching and the crowds are in an uproar about what he's saying. And the temple police come, and they think about taking Jesus down, but then they look at the crowds and think maybe not. And when the Pharisees get a hold of them, they're furious. "Why didn't you arrest him- they want to know? He hasn't beguiled you, too, has he?" They say. And what can the police say? But Nicodemus actually defends the police, saying, "The law doesn't judge a man without giving him a hearing, does it?" And his friends turn on him, sarcastically saying, "Oh, are you from Galilee now, too?" It's a dangerous moment for him- certainly not a high moment in his Pharisee career.

The truth is, as much as we want life to be clear it, as much as we long for life to come down to right paths, wrong paths, and that's it- it just doesn't seem to be like this. The better, but harder truth of it all is, there are as many ways to get through life as there are people. And whether we're on the right path at any given time...this isn't always easy to tell. Especially, if we're like Nicodemus, and we're taking the road less traveled.

Well, I had fun with the sermon title this week. You all make fun of me for saying everything is my favorite- well Moliere is not one of my favorite playwrights, but I couldn't stop thinking about his life this week.

When I was in high school our class read *Le Misanthrope* by Moliere. I loved it. It's about this hilarious if cynical man, Alceste, and his hatred of French society- how everyone said one thing to your face and another behind your back. He's so fed up with

the hypocrisy around him, he decides to only say honest things- no matter how nasty and how much trouble this brought him. As you can imagine most of what's funny about the play comes in Alceste's witty observations that most of us would also think, but probably wouldn't say. The twist in the play, and what makes it a great play, is despite Alceste's hatred for his double faced friends, he falls in love with Celimene, a woman renowned for being catty and insincere. Completely aware he should hate Celimene most of all, Alceste can't help himself and struggles to figure out a way to be with Celimene when he can't really love her and he definitely can't hate her either.

Moliere himself played Alceste on the stage, and scholars agree Alceste was an autobiographical character for Moliere. Many also believe Celimene was more than just a woman. Many see her as a symbolic figure standing as a symbol for the theater itself- the theater that Moliere both hated and loved.

Why did he hate it? Well, there weren't a whole lot of options in French theater in Moliere's day. You had tragedy, which was heavy and very stylized. And while Moliere loved tragedy and considered the "real" theater, he was terrible at it. He came off as pompous and overly serious. Unfortunately, the only other option was farce- farce is kind of the slapstick of the old world with twisting plots, exotic locals, and lots and lots of drunks stumbling around the stage for comic effect. Moliere loved tragedy because it said so much- but he was terrible at it. And he hated farce, but he had a genius for comedy and making people laugh.

So what did the poor man do with this theater he couldn't love but he couldn't hate? He did something no one else did- he wrote his own plays and he created an

entirely different kind of theater, a theater no one around him had ever seen. He created satire, comedy with a brain and a bite, something completely new to the French.

It would have been easy for him to just have quit- to cut his hair and get a real job. Or he could have kept doing farce and turned into a bitter, nasty man. But he did the hard thing of rejecting what seemed to be true, that if you wanted to do theater you had to pick between tragedy and farce- he rejected this saying why shouldn't there be as many kinds of plays as there are people willing to make them?

There just is no absolute one right for us- and this isn't just true for important Pharisees or famous playwrights. This is true for us. And there's not a person I know who doesn't second guess themselves from time to time- wondering if they've made the right decisions, wondering if they're the person they were meant to be, or whether they made a crucial mistake at some point along the way and screwed it all up with no way to really fix it now.

Our families and friends are sometimes the worst about this. They care about us, and because of that sometimes they fear for us- and because of that sometimes they aren't the most helpful people in the whole wide world. I think this is especially true of parents- we have these ideas about what a good life is, and sometimes its hard for us to tell what's true in general from what's simply true for us. And so when our children come to us for help, for guidance, we tell them what we think they should do- and this may be a very different thing from supporting them in the direction they really ought to be headed. I think every parent does this, even when we try not to. You care too much. It's why you

need friends, and aunts, and grandparents, and teachers, and people who can be a little more objective.

And it's worse when parents don't even try- when they just import all of their beliefs, their worldviews on to us. And God help the person who steps out of line and follows the beat of their own drummer. Especially if it doesn't go well. Families can be like these terrible elephants remembering our every failure no matter how long ago they happened, and reminding us at the worst possible time.

But sometimes it isn't our families or our friends making us second guess ourselves- sometimes we just get it into our own heads how we should be or what our lives should be like, and we're the ones telling ourselves how far off the mark we are.

When I was in high school and college I loved the show Northern Exposure. The lead is this guy Joel Fleischman, this uptight, overly analytical, whiny New York doctor. He moves up to Alaska to pay off his medical debts, and he absolutely hates it. Then, there's Chris Stevens, this motorcycle riding, laid back radio DJ who is part ex-con and part philosophy professor.

Now, when I was in high school and college, I'll just be perfectly honest with you. I wanted to be Chris. Yeah, I wanted to be smart, like both Chris and Joel, but really what I wanted to be was cool and dangerous like Chris. I wanted to be a motorcycle guy. I wanted to be the kind of guy that would make your parents nervous if you brought me home. And I did a lot of the things you were supposed to do- I grew my hair out, I had the earrings and everything. But the truth of it all? I'm not really a Chris-in-the-morning kind of guy. The truth of it all is I'm much more like Joel- a little nerdy,

a little neurotic. And for years I fought this- not happy with myself, wishing I could be something, or be somebody, that I'm really not. I'm doing a little better with this these days. I think having kids helps. But there's still a part of me that wishes I didn't live in my head so much and could relax more about things. But I'm beginning to realize that maybe it's OK. I'm beginning to think that maybe it's OK to be this person I've been made to be- even if I'm not always the person I wish I could be.

Faith is living into who God has called us to be, and walking down the paths in front of us as best we can. It's not trying to fit ourselves into some preconceived idea about what a good person is or what the one right path is. It's not being on the path we planned for or the path we even like that's important- but being on the one that's right for us today, no matter how strange it looks to folks around us.

This is why I'm so thankful for Nicodemus- this strange duck in the middle of all those good guys and bad guys. At the very end of John's Gospel Nicodemus shows up just one more time. After Jesus has died, Nicodemus and his friend Joseph take Jesus' body, anoint it, and bury it properly, in that garden tomb Mary goes to the next morning. The disciples, the good guys, the guys who should be doing this- there off hiding their heads denying they even knew Jesus. It's this mixed up, confused Pharisee we don't even understand- he's the one caring for Jesus, risking his life and reputation to pay him this final honor. And the scholars tell us that it's common for people to use 10 pounds of myrrh for even a very lavish funeral- Nicodemus brings 100.

Moliere once wrote: “À vous dire la vérité, il y a peu de choses qui me soient impossibles, quand je veux m'y mêler.” This means: “To tell you the truth, there are few things impossible, if only I try.” And if this were true for Moliere, how much more is it true for the Holy One of Israel, who sets us each on a path no one is able to fully see or know. My friends may we walk our path this day with our heads held high. May we walk it without any excuses, explanations, and without any shame, in the light of knowing this path may not be for everyone, and we may not even like it all the time- but it is our path, and ours alone. **Amen.**