

By Jason Myers, Chaplain Resident at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta at Egleston

John 3:1-17

A couple of weeks ago the surgeon and writer Sherwin Nuland died. In his National Book Award winning book *How We Die*, Nuland combined his erudition and experience as a doctor with his empathy as a son who had lost a mother at age 11 and a middle-aged man who accompanied his brother as he was dying from colon cancer. In an interview shortly after the book was published, in 1994, he had this to say:

When we have brought about a situation where we are loved and we love, where our lives have been lives - not necessarily of great accomplishment, but of a sense of having given something to others - whether those others are as close to us as our children or parents or whether those others are as far away as a radio or a television audience. When we have done that, our deaths have dignity. Our deaths become a part of our lives in the sense that with our deaths we give something to those who are left behind as we have given our lives to them.

How, Nicodemus wants to know, we all want to know, are we to get the goods that Jesus embodies, to live and die with dignity. Born again? Nicodemus wonders, a bit befuddled, and in his puzzlement I hear an echo of the comedian Dennis Miller mocking the latter-day born-again movement: "Excuse me for getting it right the first time."

Of course, none of us gets it right the first time. When it comes to the spiritual life, practice does not make perfect, it makes meaning. People who have committed their lives to a religious calling, whether as doctor, teacher, priest, or poet, must practice every day, and while striving toward perfection may be part of that practice, at its heart vocation is about what fills us with meaning and what meaning we are able to give to others.

Jesus is characteristically gnomic in suggesting to Nicodemus how he - how we - can go about this. "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." Thanks, Jesus. There is, though, great freedom in recognizing that our lives have a source we never quite grasp and are moving in a way that cannot be predicted. If the religious life was all rules, all ritual, it would be nothing more than a checklist. We need some rules to guard against our temptation to sin, and rituals provide beautiful patterns, rendering the ordinary extraordinary. They are like the notes in a musical score; the fact that they are set does not negate the power of their performance, the need to bring our whole physical and spiritual being to each performance.

As most instructors of the performance arts - dance, theater, music - will tell you, before you can improvise, you must learn - thoroughly, profoundly - the basic structures around which you will improvise. John Coltrane could not turn "My Favorite Things" into a 20 minute aria until he knew the scales and the essential melody. Martha Graham is all the more radical because she explored the points of departure from classical dance. The forms of religious life have as much truth as we are willing to invest in them. We do not make confession, pass the peace, and take communion every week to check off a list. They are the forms that allow us to improvise: to practice being more candid and speaking the truth in love; to go about the business of reconciling relationships; to thank God for the food, spiritual and physical, we receive, by grace, day after day, week after week, year after year.

It is worth noting that Nicodemus is not a newcomer to the lessons Jesus is trying to teach. He is, in fact, a teacher himself, a vocation that invites the utmost scrutiny and often teasing or outright derision from the gospel writers and Jesus. Again, there is both disappointment and good news in the fact that those set in our midst to teach us are just as clueless, just as needful of grace as we are. We want every sermon to be life-changing. We long for music that will astonish with its beauty and variety. Kathleen Norris puts this into perspective in her book *The Cloister Walk*, where she writes:

Even when I find church boring, I try to hold this in mind as a possibility: like all the other fools who have dragged themselves to church on Sunday morning, including the pastor, I am there because I need to be reminded that love can be at the center of all things, if we will only keep it there. The worship service will most likely not offer an aesthetically pleasing experience, great theological insight, or emotional release, although any and all of these things are possible, and precious when they occur. When I look at the way my life has unfolded, my presence in the Christian assembly is miracle enough.

As Paul does in his letter to the Corinthians, Jesus reminds Nicodemus that milk is nourishing when more solid foods aren't medically advisable. In this M.Div. of Israel's fitful attempts to translate the miracles that Jesus has lately performed into common-sensical blurbs - illustrations for a 3-point sermon, if you will - he reminds us that our efforts to "get" God are almost always in vain. Keep calm and worship on, Jesus says in effect. He has not come, this Son of Man, to condemn the physical world. If anything, the Incarnation proves there is no spiritual life without the physical, no physical without the spiritual.

One of Dr. Nuland's later books was originally called "The Wisdom of the Body," and later printed under the title "How We Live." How we live, how we die. All of this wisdom comes from the Body of Christ, which we confess to put at the center of everything, as a

reminder that love can be at the center of all things, and that our presence in the Christian assembly is miracle enough.