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Did you hear about the professor who got schooled? That is one way to interpret today's Gospel featuring a pharisee named Nicodemus. Today we are taking a break from Matthew's Gospel and dipping into John's Gospel. The two are different, so it's important to notice which Gospel we are in. One of the differences is John's Gospel features several remarkable people like the woman at the well whose name we never learn and Nicodemus the pharisee who doesn't fit the stereotype of the disgruntled religious leader threatened by Jesus' presence and message. Instead of plotting against Jesus, like we hear the unnamed pharisees doing, Nicodemus went directly to Jesus.

This was an unusual move for a pharisee. Pharisees in Jesus' time were the experts on religious law and practices. They worked hard to follow the law because they knew most people couldn't, either because they didn't have the resources, time, or work schedule to accommodate the demanding lifestyle the law required. So, the pharisees did it on behalf of God's people. This gave them status and prestige and the perception of being an expert, like how many people view University or College professors. Like most experts in their field, the pharisees were aware of the people who claimed to have a different view, or experience, and were quick to respond, usually by offering proof of how that different view or experience was inaccurate or incorrect or illegitimate. In a way, that was their job.

So, we might wonder why Nicodemus went to see Jesus. Maybe he went to investigate Jesus, to find some information the pharisees could use against him. Maybe he was curious and wanted to learn more. Maybe he did it out of concern for Jesus' well-being and went to inform Jesus of the proper channels he needed to go through if he wanted to become a teacher without upsetting the status quo. We can't know for sure what motivated Nicodemus to visit Jesus. The only clue the author of John's Gospel gives us is that Nicodemus visited Jesus at night.

This could be taken literally. And we also need to take into consideration that the author of John's Gospel wrote in a sometimes beautifully symbolic style. Which means the word *night* could also mean in secret, without any of the other pharisees or even the disciples knowing about it. It could mean Nicodemus did not yet understand who Jesus is; he was, you might say, "in the dark" but was about to experience the light of revelation. It could also mean all of the above.

Whatever the reason for his visit, Jesus seems to have had a transformational effect on Nicodemus that began with the conversation in today's Gospel. A lot of teachers and preachers like to break down this conversation, but I'm not going to do that today. Instead, we're going to step back and look at how Jesus schooled a pharisee on who he is and the nature of God.

The entire conversation features Jesus opening up commonly held beliefs or stories Nicodemus would know well to reveal there is more to them. That God is still present and up to something new. But it is nearly impossible to recognize God in your midst if you are not able to notice God because you are stuck in assumptions or certain of what you think you know.

One of the ways Jesus illustrates this lesson is with a story from the Book in the Hebrew Bible called Numbers. In chapter 21, there is a brief account of a time God saved God's people from poisonous snakes. Perhaps you are familiar with it. The story takes place while God's people were on their 40-year adventure wandering in the wilderness. It was not an easy journey. The people often got tired, frustrated, and impatient. During one of those times, the people did what people seem to enjoy doing best: they complained. They complained against Moses and God. Their main complaint was they didn't like the food. They hated it so much they said there wasn't any food to eat. They blamed Moses for their suffering caused by poor service by claiming he was leading them into the middle of nowhere, and they blamed God for food they did not like.

As the story goes, God sent them punishment in the form of poisonous snakes. The snakes bit the people who then got seriously ill and died. Which seems an appropriate punishment for people who were spreading poison with their words. It also got their attention and they repented, confessed it was wrong to blame God and Moses, and asked Moses to ask God to get rid of the snakes, which Moses did. But God didn't answer Moses' prayer by removing the snakes. Instead, God instructed Moses to make a replica of a snake and put it high up on a pole so people could see it. When the people who were bitten looked at the snake on the pole, they were healed.

That's all there is to the story, but when Jesus mentioned it to Nicodemus, he indicated there was more to it because the Son of Man will be lifted up in the same way – not to punish or remind people of our tendency toward complaining, anger, violence and selfishness, but to show us God's love is so powerful God is willing to suffer the same as all humans, even when we harm each other. Despite that suffering God is compassionate, not vengeful. God is not a God who causes

harm, God heals the results of harm, even the harm we cause ourselves. God heals and restores us to relationship because God loves us and, despite its flaws or dangers, God loves the whole world, even the snakes.

We are reminded of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus during the season of Lent because the pharisee who we will see again speaking up for Jesus at his trial and caring for him at his burial, sets a good example for us. To follow Jesus means to return to what we might call the School of Jesus time and again to be open to learning, to humbly acknowledge no matter our age, or how much education we have, or experience we have, God always has something new for us. This doesn't necessarily mean everything we ever believed is now wrong. It just means there is more to it, and part of growing is learning to receive what God has for us. It's true there are plenty of voices that want to poison our hearts and minds against each other and perhaps even God, which is why it is helpful to remember to look to Jesus when approaching the new and remember God loves not just you and me, but all people, even the ones we might not like, and God loves the world. When we look at any change through the perception of that love, it can help us discern where God is and how to adapt to the change in a loving way.

This can be especially helpful when going through changes that don't feel good and can make us long for the way things used to be. As comforting as nostalgia seems, it makes it difficult to pay attention to what is going on and where God is present. When we remember that God loves us and is with us, it can help us recognize how the Holy Spirit can lead us through change into something that might not be what it was before but is a bit more like God's kingdom here and now. That doesn't mean whatever was before was wrong or bad, it just means the Holy Spirit is always blowing, like the wind, calling us a little closer to God through what we learn, what we do, and what we say.