

**IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD YOUR ULTIMATE SECURITY?
QURAN 16:120; PHILIPPIANS 2:6,7; JOHN 3:1-17
FEBRUARY 20, 2005 – LENT TWO
THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

We are in week two of a sermon series on the disciple-making church. Our Wednesday evenings in Lent are also exploring this theme. Sunday mornings we are asking the question what does a disciple of Jesus look like? What is the disciple-making church?

Last week we said for disciples of Jesus actions are more important than thoughts. 'Doing' is the litmus test of discipleship. Not to disparage the life of the mind but ultimately it is how we implement our thinking into action that counts.

We also said a disciple is someone who follows Jesus' agenda not just for life, but for *his* or *her* life. The disciple-making church does the same.

Today we ask the question "is your relationship to God your ultimate security?" Perhaps that's a loaded question for a pastor to ask himself and his congregation. Nevertheless, for a faith-based community it seems like one of the right questions for us today.

Here's how security works. This past week I was in New York City for Auburn Theological Seminary's board meeting. One of the perks serving on the board is that I get to see my son who is a student at Hofstra University on Long Island.

We met late Thursday afternoon, walked "The Gates" in Central Park, visited the new addition to the Museum of Modern Art, had dinner at a New York steak-house then Ian spent the night with me at Auburn.

The next morning as we were walking to the subway so he could catch the train back to Hempstead he didn't say, 'gee the Gates were fantastic, or that steak was amazing last night, or isn't that MOMA something special.'

He said, "you know what really inspires me about this city Dad?" "No," I said. "The elderly women who travel the subways," he answered. "They move very slow, they're always carrying lots of heavy bags, some even have canes but they aren't afraid of the crowds, the speeding trains, the noise or the wild teenagers."

It was a remarkable observation by a 20 something college student. As I thought about it, he was absolutely right. Those women are amazing. And what makes them amazing is their deep sense of purpose and security.

Webster says security is freedom from care, worry or fear. Most of us find security in various things or relationships – our bank account, our marriage, our expertise in some field or business.

In the ancient world inhabitants of the Roman Empire were required to say, "Caesar is Lord." In this way the Empire established unity and control among diverse lands and peoples.

But early Christians refused to make that statement. They were citizens of a different empire, the Kingdom of God. They said, "Christ is Lord." Some Christians were even willing to meet their death because they rejected allegiance to Caesar over Christ. You see, they found their ultimate security not in the state but in their relationship to Jesus.

That's what I'm saying today. I am saying that among all the things that give security in this world, for disciples, Jesus Christ is the ultimate security.

Today's story from John's Gospel – of Nicodemus visiting Jesus at night – is a classic. Here this teacher of the law, well known and highly regarded comes to Jesus under the cover of night partly for fear of being recognized.

Nicodemus has every sign of external security – good job, social stature and financial well being – but he is a man without ultimate security.

And who among us cannot relate to Nicodemus search for ultimate security? Eventually some restlessness gets you and me up in the night and we long to know all will be well.

It's true that our fears surface in the night. I remember a colleague who had open-heart surgery. He was a young and active. They told him he'd be skiing soon.

But after his surgery, back in his hospital room at four in the morning he heard a loud, banging sound. Must be the heating system, he thought. The banging got louder and louder. "Turn it off," he shouted from his bed. None of the nurses heard him, no one responded. So he prayed, "Please God turn that thing off." Then suddenly he realized the banging was the beating of his heart – "Cancel that prayer!" he shouted to the ceiling.

It is often in the night when the noise of the day is silenced that the banging and clanging of life can be loud and overwhelming.

Get me through this night O God and I will amend my ways; fix this relationship Lord and I will forever be your servant. Heal my broken heart.

If you ever made a prayer like that in a dark night of crisis you are in good company, a long line of saints and sinners who turned to God in their hurt.

I think it's entirely possible that Nicodemus' crisis wasn't obvious to anyone. Maybe his problem was his soul was slowly turning to stone. On the surface he looked like he had his act together. On the inside he was falling apart.

The French have a word for this: ennui or boredom. Life goes on but we invest so much keeping up the way things look on the outside we lose touch with the inside.

The old grudge we keep but never settle; the pang of sadness we don't acknowledge because if we did the floodgates would open; the attention we long for from those we love but pride keeps us from asking for.

I wonder if Nicodemus wasn't deeply bored with his life. He was so in the box. Jesus' talk of being born again makes no sense to him. But Jesus had it right. Nicodemus was dead. Boredom is a preview of death if not a form of it.

You can see this in Sunday worshippers who welcome in muffled celebration any interruption of the droning service. Be honest remember the churches you have attended over the years. Have you ever quietly cheered when a child fell off a pew, a bird flew in the window, the lights went out, or the organ wheezed.

Passengers on cruise ships after nine beautiful sunsets and eighty-six invigorating games of shuffle board begin to ask the crew hopefully, "Do you think we'll have a storm?"¹ Boredom can lead to wishing for a storm – a midlife crisis, an unkind word that cuts more deeply than you intended.

Here they are Jesus and bored, searching for security Nicodemus. When Jesus says it's time to be reborn and Nicodemus doesn't get it Jesus takes another tack. Jesus didn't want to make Nicodemus more depressed. Sometimes we do this to ourselves. We beat ourselves up for being beat up by life. We assume that everything is our fault, that we don't deserve any better in life. And we deprive ourselves of God's grace and goodness.

Jesus sensed Nicodemus was thinking like this. He was still in the dark.

So Jesus re-phrased what he was saying, he said, "Nicodemus, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but be saved through him." Slowly, the light was going in Nicodemus' eyes. Jesus continued, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it."

We're talking about finding ultimate security in life. We said Nicodemus was a man with lots of worldly security but without ultimate security. What Jesus offers to Nicodemus and to each of us is ultimate security.

There's a story about an elementary school teacher, her class and one of the students. Each day the boys and girls left their homes and toys reluctantly, creeping like snails into school, not late but not a second early. At the end of the day – they were gone in a flash at the tolling of the school bell.

Except one little girl. She came early and left late. She helped clean the board, dust the erasers, put away materials. During the day she was all eyes and ears. Then once when the class was out of control again the teacher said, pointing to the girl in the front row, "Why can't you be as she is? Helpful, attentive, courteous?" "It isn't fair to ask us to be like her," one little boy responded. "Why not?" asked the teacher. "She has an advantage," he replied. "I don't understand, what do you mean?" said the teacher. "She is an orphan," the boy whispered as he sat down.ⁱⁱ

Ultimate security is simple as soon as you realize you are a spiritual orphan and reach out to God, like that little girl reached out to her teacher, you are no longer a spiritual orphan. As soon as you forget you are a child of God you become a spiritual orphan again.

In other words, left up to our own ways of finding security we finally discover that nothing we have or are can ultimately free us of the care or worry or fear of this life. Then some crisis or deadly boredom teaches us the hard lesson that we are spiritual orphans in this world. And some of us go scurrying to find Jesus.

The two baptisms we celebrated today for Declan and Devon remind us that were it not for the grace of God we would never find our way into new lives of healing and wholeness. We would never be born again.

Being a disciple of Jesus and a disciple-making church means we can claim today the Good News that each of us belongs to God and in this belonging is our ultimate security.

There are lots of other spiritual orphans out there like Nicodemus, they just don't know it yet or can't figure out why they feel empty. We can't fill their emptiness.

But we can live like those subway ladies in New York City with courage and perseverance and resolve in the face of a harsh world – and point to the one who does fill empty hearts and makes them glad and strong again.+

ⁱ Fred B. Craddock, Craddock Stories edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001) 14.

ⁱⁱ Craddock, 16.