

*Freedom: 12-Step Spirituality for Everyone Who Struggles*  
***Steps 6 & 7: Change from the Inside Out; Trusting God to Do Something With Us***

John 3:1-8

I know I've told you this story before, but today I want to tell you again about the young woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. This young woman read everything she could put her hands on—philosophy, history, psychology, religion, self-improvement books. She got a lot smarter, but nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for. She found other smart people and asked them about the meaning of life. They had long and lively discussions, but no two of them agreed on the same thing. So still, she had no answer. Finally she put all her belongings in storage, and she set off to find the meaning of life.

She went to South America; to Tibet, to India. Everywhere she went, people told her they didn't know the meaning of life either. But they'd heard of a woman who did. Only they weren't sure where she lived. The young woman asked in every country she traveled to, until finally someone told her how to reach this wise woman's home.

She walked for miles, and climbed to a little house at the top of a mountain. She knocked at the door. A kind-looking old woman opened it. "I've been halfway around the world to ask you one question," the young woman said, gasping for breath. "What is the meaning of life?"

"Come in and have some tea," the old woman said. "No—I mean no, thank you," the breathless young woman said. "I didn't come for tea. I came for an answer. Please, just tell me, what is the meaning of life?"

"We shall have tea," the old woman said. So the seeker gave up and went inside. While the tea was brewing, the younger woman caught her breath. She began telling the old woman about all the things she'd done to try to discover what she was looking for: the books she had read, the people she'd met, all the places she had been; how long she had been looking for the answers to her life, how nothing had satisfied her; that still, no answer appeared, nothing worked, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't find anything that sounded like the meaning of life.

The old woman just listened. Just as well, because the young woman didn't leave any space for her to say anything. As the seeker talked, the old woman placed a teacup in her hand. Then she began to pour the tea. The young woman was so busy talking, that she didn't even notice when the teacup was full, so the old woman just kept pouring until the tea flowed over the sides of the cup and started to spill onto the floor.

"What are you doing?" the younger woman shouted when the tea burned her hand. "It's full! Can't you see that? Stop! There's no room!"

"Yes, I see," the old woman said to her. "You came here wanting something from me, but there's no room in your cup. Come back when your cup is empty, and then we'll talk."

I tell you that story today because I think in some way it's a re-telling of the story of Nicodemus, the story from John's Gospel that we read this morning. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a leader of his community. Which John tells us so that we'll know Nicodemus was doing well in life. He was one of those people who you might look at and think, "He's got it all together." Nicodemus was not one of those people we see in other Gospel stories whose hunger, or need for healing, or poverty is written all over his face. He's not someone who pushes his way through a crowd because he's desperate to get near the faith healer who has come to town. I doubt that Nicodemus would have set foot into those crowds that gathered to hear Jesus teach out in the fields, so hungry for the words of a wise man that they stayed long through dinner time, until Jesus felt sorry for them and fed them all with whatever fish and bread he could scrounge up.

No, Nicodemus was a strong, self-sufficient man. He already had all the resources he needed to survive, and even to do well. His life was full. He'd already handled most of his issues. He liked that reputation...which is why he came to Jesus at night, when no one else was around, when he was not likely to be seen by anyone else.

In John's story, Nicodemus doesn't actually get around to asking Jesus a question, so we're never completely sure what was on his mind when he left home that night, but he needed something. He begins the conversation trying to sound more like a colleague than a student. "Rabbi," he says, "we all know you're a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the things you do if God weren't helping you." And Jesus could hear even in that first line something about who Nicodemus was and what he wanted. He wanted to talk, man-to-man, smart-and-successful-man-to-smart-and-successful-man, about the secrets to success. So Jesus didn't have to wait for the next sentence. He knew Nicodemus was asking, "Tell me how you do it. Tell me where you learned to do what you do, what are the steps you follow; tell me how I can get some of that God presence inside of me too."

This summer, we've been talking about the twelve-step spirituality of Alcoholics Anonymous as a path that might lead us into that God-presence that Nicodemus was looking for. Into freedom. Freedom from old patterns and habits and attachments that bind us, freedom for good and whole relationships with God and with one another. In the first five steps we've traced that path that can lead from your own thrashing around to honesty about the condition of your life, and ultimately to surrender to the living God who wants and waits to heal you. Today we come the sixth and seventh steps. In traditional AA language: "We were entirely ready to have God remove all our defects of character," and "We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings."

I see Nicodemus sitting right here with us in this conversation. He's probably sitting in the corner of one of those back pews. He slipped in late. He doesn't see himself as someone who *needs* church, but it would be nice if he heard something that made him feel better about his life. There's this niggling feeling that keeps coming to him, like there must be some secret he hasn't learned, some process he should have completed, something he hasn't yet understood. That's why Nicodemus stayed up late and snuck out of his own house in the middle of the night. He needed to see if he could get just a few minutes with Jesus, a teacher who looked like he had mastered life.

The Bible doesn't say all of this, but I know it's true for Nicodemus because I know it's true for us. There's that one thing—or maybe it's more than one thing—that we just can't get hold of, a thorny relationship or worry or bad habit or stuck place in our lives that we just can't control. If

someone would just tell us *what to do*, how to break the solution down into ten steps—or maybe even twenty-five—we'd be willing to follow the program and do whatever we need to do to make our problem go away. Won't someone just tell me *what I should do*?

Jesus' response to Nicodemus was sort of like pouring tea all over his hand. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being reborn," he said—sort of obscurely. You have to be born of the Spirit, which blows where it will blow, and you can't see it, and you don't know where it comes from or where it's going, and you must have this Spirit inside of you...

Nicodemus must have been scratching his head at this point, looking back at Jesus and saying, "Huh?"

Which is, I think, the point. Among all the things that Jesus did, he left us no manual for taking control of your life.

So how do we find the kind of deep, life-altering transformation we long for? Step 6 says: It's not about controlling your behavior. It happens invisibly, mysteriously, from the inside. *We were entirely ready to have God remove all our defects of character.* Maybe the important words here—the hard words—are *entirely* and *all*.

I think most of us know we need to change. There are several things in my life that I'd give up right now, habits or patterns that I could immediately identify as problems that get in my way. But *all* my defects of character? Even the ones that I think of as part of my personality? I'm kind of attached to those things!

Sometimes I wonder if one of the things we fear most is being ordinary. Who would you be without the sharp edge of anger, the thoughtful self-pity, or that cynical, biting sense of humor that is just part of your personality? Maybe you're a little like the AA member who said, "I was willing to have God round off the rough edges of my character, but not remove them. I thought that with God's help I could learn to control my so-called defects of character, turn them into what I knew they were: not defects at all, but endearing quirks that made me unique!"

This step says *entirely*. If you're really going to change from the inside out, you can't choose which defects or flaws in your life you want fixed and hold back the rest. Surrendering means letting go of all of it, putting your whole self in God's hands. Letting God take hold of not only the messy situations you want help controlling, but also the parts of you that you've begun to think of like old friends or eccentric relatives—a small problem, but on balance, something you can live with.

This kind of change requires trust. Can you trust that what God wants and hopes for you is the best version of yourself, not some zombie-like generic rule-follower you wouldn't even recognize?

That's the question, isn't it? It's also the question of the 7th step, which challenges us to "Trust God to do something with us." Trust *God* to do it. Which is quite a different thing than figuring out how to do it yourself.

Our good, American, can-do spirit says that the only one you can really depend on to figure things out, to take care of your problems and inadequacies, to make your life what it's supposed to be, is you. Create high expectations for yourself, we've been told. We should make ourselves better, kinder, more capable, more loving than we know we really are. God is supposed to be our helper, a booster switch we can reach for to assist us in achieving our goals. From time to time we need that help. We wish God would do this job a little more predictably. But ultimately we're the managers. We're the ones who are calling the shots about what we'd like fixed and how we'd like our lives to look. Even our spiritual lives are something we are trying to *do*.

Tell me what to do so that I can have my own wisdom, the young seeker climbed the mountain to ask the wise woman. That's what Nicodemus wanted from Jesus: tell me what *I* should *do* so that my life will look more like yours.

No, Jesus said to Nicodemus.

No, said the old woman as she poured tea over the top of the cup.

No, these steps say.

The only prayer that can save us is something more like this: "I can't do this. I don't even know what needs to happen here. But you do, God. Can you give me the grace to get out of the way, to trust, so that you can do with me whatever needs to be done? Give me the patience not to force things, not even to force myself. I am putting things into your hands. I am—finally—ready to *receive* what I cannot make happen for myself."<sup>i</sup>

Maybe that sounds as vague and mysterious to you as Jesus' saying to Nicodemus "You must be born from above." All I can tell you is that when I can do this hard thing of leaning into the arms of God: acknowledging that God isn't there just to help me do it my way, but to take over; when I can hold on to God's hand like a child, trusting God to give me what is needed for whatever is at hand—somehow things begin to change. Insights come. The people around me seem to shift their positions—or maybe it's my position that shifts. I listen more carefully. A way forward just seems to appear. Something inside of me begins to feel more right. And I can't explain it any better than that.

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<sup>i</sup> Some of these words and thoughts are from *Becoming Human*, by Brian C. Taylor.