

**Gods Love. “God loves everyone. No ifs or buts.”**

Wanna know how to win points in a Jewish context? Word play. Linguistic gymnastics. And a lot and a lot of questions. Questions are way more important than answers. That is because a well timed and asked question brings more insight than answers.

Recently musician Billie Eilish spoke at a Wall Street Journal awards ceremony. To a roomful of billionaires, she asked, "Why are you a billionaire?"

I imagine some began to think of their lauds, their successes, their luck. But the question was more a Jewish style question than an English style. The question was to provoke thought.

Why are billionaires a thing that exists?

Eilish added, "No hate, but give your money away, shorties."

No one ought to be a billionaire. Someone who ends up with that much money ought to be giving away billions.

Nicodemus and Jesus have this kind of a conversation in our reading today. Before we get into the marvelous ways they challenge each other, we need to get some background information.

Nicodemus is a Greek-Jewish person. He has a Greek name, but he is of the Jewish faith. He is part of the Pharisees, who are the political-religious party that are very concerned with living a moral life.

Jesus is a hinterlands-Jewish person. He's known to be from that suspect area where Jews and Samaritans mingle. He's preaching and teaching with signs he comes empowered from God. And he also wants people to live a moral life.

They are in a world awash in the languages of Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Signage is bi or tri lingual. And conversations are too.

This conversation we overhear today is in multiple languages. It is also between two spiritual leaders who live in a world where spiritual power is shown through mastery of language.

Nicodemus, who secretly admires Jesus, goes to speak with Jesus privately at night. Will this rural Rabbi live up to his reputation when in the flesh? Or can Nicodemus out-smart him?

Nicodemus makes the first move, a single pawn on the chess board steps forward. He says "Master" or "Teacher", "we know you are a master/teacher come from God; for no man can do the wonders you do except God be with him."

Jesus however cuts to the heart of the matter of this visit. He isn't interested in the accolades and the flattery. He isn't interested in "we" at all. He is interested in Nicodemus, who is right here. And Nicodemus' spiritual journey.

Jesus says, "Truly, Truly, I say to YOU. Unless one is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Jesus skips the pawns and goes right for the knight.

Nicodemus pauses. He changes tactics. "Again" and "From Above" are the same word in Koine Greek. The word is "anothen" It means again, to repeat, anew; or it means from above, from up. Perhaps Nicodemus intentionally misunderstands Jesus, because asking a good question is a victory point in Jewish debate. He chooses to hear Jesus say, "One must be born again" instead of "One must be born from above." Perhaps a bit victoriously, Nicodemus asks, "How can a human, being old, be born? Is it possible for a person to enter their mother's womb a second time and be born again?" Nicodemus moves his knight out to match Jesus.

And then the game is on. Water has a double meaning - water can mean womb, birth, and it can mean baptism, conversion. So we have born of water or born of baptism.

Spirit and Wind are the same word in Hebrew. "Ruach". It also means Breath, and implies life - all that breathes. So the wind comes and goes - or the Spirit comes and goes - or life comes and goes.

One is born with breath - breathing, alive. Or one is born with spirit - infused with God's presence.

The ability to enter God's realm is because one is a descendant of Abraham - in the flesh - Jewish. Or the ability to enter God's realm is to be born with God's spirit, unpredictability, appearing among Jews and non-Jews.

The pieces on the board are moving fast and furious as the two religious leaders out maneuver one another.

Finally Nicodemus sees he is losing. He mutters, "How can these things be?"

It is another victory point for himself. He is both asking how is it this backwater nobody is defeating him - a city educated Hellenistic Jew - and he is asking how one is born from above/again and the Spirit/wind goes to whomever God chooses regardless of their pedigree.

Jesus goes for the checkmate, "You're a scholar and you don't understand?" Just how can you call yourself a scholar then? Nicodemus watches the board clear and his king get captured.

Jesus concludes, "You came here asking me about heaven and spiritual things, when you don't believe me about earthly and physical things. So why would you believe me about the spiritual when you won't accept my testimony on the physical?"

The Son of Man speaks about these heavenly things because that's where he is from.

Health came to the people through Moses who lifted up the serpent on a stick so everyone who looked to it when in threat of dying could be saved from death. So, too, will the Son of Man be lifted up, known, so everyone who looks to him will be saved from eternal death and have eternal life.

Look, God so loves the world that God has given God's only child, so everyone who believes, trusts, acts in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Indeed, God didn't send the Son into the world to damn it, condemn it, hurt it - but in order to save it, liberate it, heal it through the Son."

The game is over. Nicodemus has lost the oral debate. I think he is delighted. The next time we see Nicodemus, he works quickly and boldly with Joseph to obtain Jesus' corpse and give Jesus a burial.

Nicodemus came to Jesus, secretly admiring him, but wanting to test him. And Nicodemus didn't find Jesus wanting. He found the Son of God. The saviour. The messiah. The promised one. The chosen one. The beloved.

How lovely to find the person you admire is just as awesome in the flesh as in their reputation!

An important part of Nicodemus' and Jesus' conversation is picked up on by Paul in Romans.

Paul is writing to the churches in Rome. They are Hellenistic Jews, and Hebrew Jews; they are converts to Judaism and they are converts to Jesus but have not adopted Jewish ways.

And naturally, they all think the other is wrong in the faith.

One group says to be right with God, you have to be born a descendant of Abraham, be faithfully Jewish, and then follow the Jewish messiah Jesus.

Another group says to be right with God, you have to proclaim Jesus is Lord. End of story.

And there's loads of people between these two polars.

Paul addresses his fellow Jewish-Christians first and says, "We are ancestors of Abraham. Absolutely. But Abraham was blessed BEFORE he was Jewish. He hadn't done anything yet to be Jewish. God just blesses him because Abraham trusts God. Believes in God. Has faith in God. Later Abraham becomes circumcised and becomes what we consider Jewish. But the blessing came first. "

So Paul includes everyone, writing, "Therefore, Abraham is the faith ancestor of Jewish people and non-Jewish people. He is the father-of-many. Father of nations. Peoples. Cultures. He, and his descendants, are blessed through their shared faith in God. The promise of this blessing is based on grace - the unmerited kindness of God.

God loves the world. God loves you and me. Therefore, God blesses us.

But God also blesses and loves those who are not the physical descendants of Abraham. Because the blessing of God came to Abraham and Sarah because of their faith, and passes through faith."

So anyone - born Christian or Jewish, born Muslim or Hindu - anyone can be a faith descendant of Abraham.

The Spirit of God goes where it will. We can't predict or dictate who will, or won't, respond to God's whispers of love.

But that love is persistent and loves all people.

No ifs.

No buts.

No caveats.

The Greek in John is "God so loved the kosmos -" cosmos. All galaxies and universes. All dimensions and timelines. All that is and was and will be. God's love is so encompassing, so complete, so inclusive - that God chose not to damn and hurt, but to save and heal.

Love that loves those who do not love God.

Love that blesses those who do not know God.

Love that cares for and about those who hurt and hate God.

Love that is unconditional - Love that is stronger and more perfect than any love a human can obtain.

Love that is the ultimate power of the cosmos - Love that is God's very essence and nature.

Jesus and John both argue that God loves us. God loves us across denominations. God loves us across faiths. God loves us when we sin and when we live holy lives. God loves us. No ifs and buts.

God has great dreams and calls forth things that do not exist; God works with us to bring about goodness and kindness; God hopes we chose good and love - God weeps with us over choices and tragedies.

But no matter what happens, no matter what we do or don't do, no matter if we know God or not, no matter anything at all - God loves us. This is grace. This is unmerited love. This is unmerited kindness. God loves the cosmos.

With that kind of loving-kindness undergirding all reality, all the cosmos seen and unseen, what power we have to reach across to the person right before us and find common ground.

What strength is loaned to us to perceive the words behind the words. The double and triple meanings.

What wisdom God gifts us through the Spirit to presume people mean well, even if they go about it poorly.

Because love underpins all reality, all the cosmos are at default good. All people are in their core good. All are made in the image of God – which is the image of good and love. And since God loves all people, we are challenged and encouraged to love all people too.

With God, all things are possible – including universal love.

So may we counter all hate with love. May we question all with love. May we live in love. Die in love. Rise in love. May we love.

Amen.

