

A Season of Conversations

By Grace Imathiu



The Reverend Grace Imathiu is the Senior Pastor of First United Methodist Church – Evanston. She was born and raised in Kenya, married a white European atheist, and together have raised a first-generation African American mathematician. Grace knows the power of conversations and the ability of conversations to transform lives.

Every cycle of presidential elections, I get the opportunity as a preacher to reflect on what is America and to affirm how Christians are called to live in the diverse and pluralistic community that is America. As one of America’s newer immigrants, I am especially aware of the beauty of America because, unlike those who were born in America as well as those who are in exile, I have chosen America as my home. Having been born and raised in Kenya, I have had the privilege of learning from scratch how to be American. When, twenty-five years ago, I was appointed senior pastor of a large United Methodist Church in Green Bay, Wisconsin, I did not realize at the time I was going to be a guest of the The Green Bay Packers. Imagine my surprise when I arrived in my new home church and discovered that I had season tickets to the Packer games and was expected to attend. I knew nothing about football. I grew up with soccer and was a diehard fan of Man United—an English football club. The little I had seen of American football had baffled me and as far as I was concerned it was plain wrong. How on earth could players use their hands to not only touch the ball but carry the ball and then have the audacity of calling it FOOTball! I was not sure I could abide by those double standards of feet and hands.

But alas, since it was part of my work for the Lord, I set to educate myself and immediately purchased *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Football*. It was a manual that promised to teach me “how to understand football like a pro.” Understanding football was going to signal that I was a member of the community and more so, an American. I should not have been concerned about understanding football. As it turned out, like every great game, the best part of the game was actually not the scorecard at the end of the game, but the joy of the game itself. I remember my awe as I entered Lambeau Field with its seating capacity of 81,000. I got caught up in the magic of witnessing the game dismantle the walls that keep us apart. As fans cheered and booed, there was no more attention to the labels of Democrat, Republican, or Independent. There was no Christian, Muslim, Jew, Atheist, or Agnostic, just the game.

There was no old or young, male or female, straight or queer, white or black. The game was a glimpse of America at its best. My husband and I looked at each other with so much joy. We had found a space where a black Christian woman and a white atheist man could find themselves welcome and belonging in all of our complexities. It was magical. This was my America!

And then it happened. The spell of the game was broken and the mood was ruined as I spotted a lone guy holding up a homemade placard with “John 3:16.” I knew John 3:16 very well. It was the first passage I had memorized in Sunday school, and I was surprised at how jarring that beloved passage appeared when held up in such a setting at such a time. It looked like “matter out of place”! I wondered what those who were unfamiliar with the Bible might have made of it, especially since there was no explanation or QR Code as a resource on its meaning. Although at its best the placard could have been an attempt at spreading the good news, it seemed to me there could have been verses that could have been better stand-alone verses. For instance, there is the “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” which is a universal golden rule that is found in many religious traditions. Or, if one would wish for a uniquely Christian passage, a reference to Jesus’s sermon on the mount with a placard declaring “Matthew 5. Blessed.” The John 3:16 choice seemed very odd and wrong on that afternoon in Lambeau Field. The verse’s intention seemed violent and threatening. If there was an underbelly of the dream called America, this could very well be a glimpse of it. And most frightening, Jesus’s words were being used. Suddenly Lambeau Field and the America it represented was not as safe for everyone as I had imagined.

John 3:16 is a popular text at football games. Take for instance the football game of January 8, 2009, when the quarterback of one of the football teams inscribed “3:16” under his eyes with a black eyeliner. It was like war paint or some Christian wizardry which was supposed to conjure up his team’s win. And indeed, his team won, prompting “3:16” to go viral as a reportedly 94 million people around the world did a Google search for 3:16. Some Christians believe that the viral search for “3:16” warrants recognition as one of the greatest moments of Christian evangelism. However, exploring search engines with “what does John 3:16 mean in football?” yields a very telling answer that “among the general public, John 3:16 is often interpreted as saying ‘we believe in you, team!’”

It is a dangerous undertaking to yank a single verse out of the context of a private conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in the cover of darkness and put it on a placard as a single bullet for public display under bright lights. The placard and its engine searches ignore the heart of the verse: these are words spoken in a conversation, and conversations are about relationships. Jesus is a master conversationalist in the gospel of John. Through conversations, Jesus builds relationships that cross boundaries. For instance, we see Jesus at Jacob’s well in Samaria engaging with an unnamed Samaritan woman in a conversation that lasts an entire chapter! At the end

of the conversation, the woman runs to her village to raise the alarm of the possibility of a Messiah. Jesus does not beat people over the head with placards. Jesus engages in the kind of conversation that led a woman of Samaria to wonder out loud whether Jesus was the Messiah.

In its proper context, John 3:16 is set in another of Jesus's extraordinary conversations in the gospel of John. A Pharisee named Nicodemus initiates the conversation. Pharisees are well-known characters in the gospels and are portrayed as opponents of Jesus. However, this is the only time in any of the gospels that a Pharisee is given a name.

This naming of a member of a group not only powerfully gives an individual agency, it humanizes Pharisees as well as disrupts the perception that Pharisees are a homogeneous group. Indeed, that is such a helpful reminder, especially when we might dismiss individuals who belong to a political party we do not like. It is easy to forget people have names and have individual agency. Political party allegiances do not erase our names. In our current context, it is easy to turn people into bullet points rather than conversations. For instance, I heard someone calling someone else "a MAGA." In as much as the individual had particular political leanings, they were also a mother and a friend and had a name. This is a season of paying attention to ways we diminish the humanity of others, make assumptions that we know everything there is to know about the other, destroying our curiosity and ending the potential of a conversation.

Once Nicodemus is released from our assumption that he is only and merely a Pharisee, we might begin to be curious about him as a person. For instance, we could be interested to see that only the gospel of John mentions Nicodemus. He is not mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures or in any of the synoptic gospels, Acts of the Apostles, the epistles, or the apocalyptic literature. And John mentions Nicodemus not just once in the conversation with Jesus, but two more times. The gospel writer follows Nicodemus to the Sanhedrin where we learn Nicodemus is a member with voice and vote. Nicodemus is a man with some power. And in his third appearance, we meet Nicodemus on that fateful Good Friday when all of Jesus's disciples have deserted him for fear of the empire. Nicodemus and a companion arrive at the cross with a hundred pounds of spices and a linen cloth and together they lug Jesus's dead weight to a virgin tomb.

What begins with a conversation produces an advocate and finally a funeral director. With Jesus's burial greatly rushed, one wonders whether Nicodemus might have been the one to say the prayers of the dead for Jesus. After all, he was a devout Jew like Jesus and would have known the final rituals of the dead. However, even with such care for Jesus, we are not told that Nicodemus became a disciple of Jesus. In their conversation, Jesus was not seeking conversion. Authentic conversations do not have the agenda for conversion. Conversations are transformative. Conversations change lives.

Conversations are an art and Jesus was the master conversationalist. Unlike presidential debates that intend to display one's strengths and mock the weaknesses of the opponent, authentic conversations are filled with curiosity about the other and respect for the other. In their conversation, Jesus and Nicodemus are not performing for social media in order to drive up ratings or to make it to the front covers of any newspaper. Nicodemus initiated the meeting by approaching Jesus at night when both teachers had completed their day's work and their students had gone home. Those of us suspicious of Pharisees in general might perhaps be suspicious of his addressing Jesus saying "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Can we trust these opening lines from a Pharisee, one might wonder?

The truth is that we must overcome our own prejudices before we can have honest conversations with those who have been painted as our opponents or enemies. In this instance, what we have heard about Pharisees could very well shut down a conversation with a member of that group, even before it begins. On the other hand, Nicodemus is different; we know him by name. And we can appreciate his grace in making room for Jesus and inviting him into a conversation. Jesus makes room for Nicodemus, Nicodemus makes room for Jesus. Conversations are a two-way relationship unlike a sterile placard with a single bullet point of a verse. Conversations intentionally are filled with curiosity about the other, perhaps seeking better understanding that can only be achieved in a one-on-one conversation rather than a public debate.

Conversations share something in common. Both Nicodemus and the gospel of John have the same fundamental concern: is Jesus the Messiah? Nicodemus is probably hoping Jesus will come out and confess that he is the Messiah. But Jesus will not self-reveal. Jesus will only provide data and evidence and allow others to make their decisions about him for themselves. However, the gospel of John is clear that it does not intend to just provide data and evidence about Jesus; it intends for the reader to "come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). So, although the night conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus does not end with Nicodemus declaring Jesus is the Messiah, the conversation models how to create space for others, especially in those times when we are faced with sensitive topics that are loaded with religious and political challenges.

Like good conversations, the Jesus and Nicodemus conversation constantly seeks to identify common ground and then seeks to move from the known to the unknown. However, when what is assumed to be "common ground" does not work, the conversationalist is willing to pivot to an even clearer image. I wonder whether Jesus was surprised when Nicodemus did not immediately latch on to the metaphor of "being born again." Nicodemus takes the metaphor literally. He was probably filled with distaste and might have frowned with disgust, when he challenged Jesus on the ridiculous and odd image of a grown man crawling up into his aged mother's womb

in order to be born a second time. Surely the misunderstanding must have surprised or even annoyed Jesus! But Jesus is very unlike someone like me who would have thrown my up hands and chastised Nicodemus for “missing the point.” Jesus is a master conversationalist who pivots to find another more general metaphor. He then speaks of the natural world with the experience of the wind. Everyone would agree that we hear the sound of the wind but no one knows where the invisible character that is the wind comes from or where it goes. Nicodemus and Jesus can share that basic truth. Good conversationalists like Jesus keep the conversation moving forward, finding ways to navigate difficulties that can become conversation stoppers.

As we enter our pulpits during another cycle of presidential elections, we are challenged to divest of the cheap placards of bullet points that destroy conversations. Instead, on the shoulders of Jesus the master conversationalist, we can challenge those who insist Jesus is only a verse or a slogan. And among our work is that work of naming the other by name and restoring their humanity and dignity in the conversation. But even more challenging is our work to be the Nicodemus who initiates conversation with the Other. Our success could very well become communities of faith that are not homogenous but offer their members the opportunity to know the other by name. America is not just football, baseball, or apple pie. These days, it seems to me that our conversations in America are faltering, and those of us who speak from the pulpit can help keep conversations moving forward. John 3:16 is a testimony that divine conversations save lives.