

## “Non Sequitur Sunday”

John 3:1-17

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL  
Trinity Sunday,  
Memorial Day Weekend  
May 30, 2021  
Matt Matthews

JoAnn A. Pos, writing for the Christian Century loosely suggests that the conversation Nicodemus has with Jesus is a non sequitur. A non sequitur, according to Websters, is a statement (such as a response) that does not follow logically from or is not clearly related to anything previously said.

This might be a non sequitur: Where there's a will, I want to be in it. Or, standing in a garage doesn't make you a car, anymore than sitting in a church makes you a Christian. Technically, those phrases might better be considered paraprosochians. But this is a classic non sequitur, from Bertrand Russell: “War does not determine who is right—only who is left.” Here's another non sequitur: “I've had a perfectly wonderful evening,” said Groucho Marx. “But this wasn't it.”

A non sequitur: One part of a sentence or conversation is only strangely and unexpectedly connected to the other.

Jesus' answers to Nicodemus's questions present a disconnect for Nicodemus. Nicodemus asks one thing, and Jesus' answer doesn't seem like an answer to the right question. Nicodemus—and we—seem to be stumped by Jesus' circuitous answers to otherwise straightforward questions.

“We know you are a teacher” is met with “one needs to be born from above.”

“Can a person crawl back into the womb?” is met with “the wind blows where it will.”

Flummoxed, Nicodemus sighs, “How can these things be?”

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We live in a non-sequitur world. We buried a local police officer killed in the line of duty last week, nearly one year after a Minneapolis police officer murdered an unarmed black man named George Floyd. We grieve and pray for the safety of our police, even as we work on reforming how we think about policing in our community. We feel unsafe by the rise of random shootings, and we call on our police to protect us, and yet we send them into untenable situations and expect only the best outcomes. We expect them to be counselors, friends, nurses, directors of traffic, and so much more.

Do you feel this tension? In our community? In our nation? We are right to be having conversations about the fabric of families, poverty, systemic social ills, racism, education, mutuality, trust, brother- and sisterhood, neighborhoods, and much more. After praying through the news, we are often left shaking our heads: *How can these things be?*

Nicodemus is learning that knowing Jesus, believing in Jesus, and following Jesus doesn't always give us absolute clarity in all things. Nicodemus leaves scratching his head. “How can these things be?”

We want the scenes of our life to connect nicely, serenely from one scene to the next, dot-to-dot. But life is often herky-jerky, up-and-down, a succession of near-misses and head-on collisions. How can these things be? Life is such a puzzle sometimes.

My three sons and their friends are struggling mightily to make sense of the death of one of their high school classmates. Jeremy Chen died of prostate cancer at the age of 25. This isn't supposed to happen to their friends. This isn't supposed to happen to a man so young, so vital, so gifted. But it did. Death happened.

These friends made a video to share with Jeremy before he died. He liked it very much. A dozen or so friends from the high school band, an art teacher, and others put together their comments. *Hey Jeremy, sorry you're sick. I'm thinking about you.* They shared memories. All those beautiful words and the telling of those old stories, of singing *Twist and Shout* on the band bus, all boiled down to two words said over and over: thanks and love. Thank you, Jeremy. I love you, Jeremy.

And that's the word we are left with in this story of Nicodemus and Jesus. The final and the clearest word is *love*. In the biggest non sequitur of all, John tells us that God loved the world so much, God sent his son to die. This is as big a disconnect as we read in all of scripture, it seems to me. But this mystery is at the heart of our faith.

We live in a non sequitur world. Things don't always line up. We hold in tension lots of differing perspectives and views—often not 'right' or 'wrong', but different. Conflicting. We want life's loose ends to be tied in a neat bow, but that is usually not how life plays out.

On our refrigerator is a copy of **The Immigrants Creed**. It is filled with the dis-connects of the faith. God guides us in exile and through exodus. Joseph was enslaved in Egypt. Daniel was thrown into a lion's den in Babylon. Jesus was a displaced Galilean. He fled his own country when his life was endangered. Back in his own country, he lived under the tyranny of Pontius Pilate, the servant of a foreign power. Jesus, an innocent man, was executed at the hands of the state, to the jeers of its citizens whom Jesus had come to love and redeem. People of faith, in following the life of Jesus, have to keep up with lots of disconnects. Non sequiturs. Unexpected twists and turns.

The writer Frederick Buechner agrees. *IF THE WORLD IS sane, then Jesus is mad as a hatter and the Last Supper is the Mad Tea Party. The world says, Mind your own business, and Jesus says, There is no such thing as your own business. The world says, Follow the wisest course and be a success, and Jesus says, Follow me and be crucified. The world says, Drive carefully—the life you save may be your own—and Jesus says, Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. The world says, Law and order, and Jesus says, Love. The world says, Get and Jesus says Give. In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion.<sup>[1]</sup>*

But here's the main thing: the God who transcends all of life's non sequiturs loves us, and that is an amazing, settling (or depending on your perspective, unsettling) fact. God's love is a healing, abiding, tough, gracious, radical love. Because of this love, Jesus, by the power of God's Spirit, walks with us as one well-acquainted with the ups and downs of this topsy-turvy, herky-jerky life. Thanks be to God.

Nicodemus leaves his meeting with Jesus still intrigued by Jesus, but confused. Jesus spoke of a bigger picture that Nicodemus could not at that moment grasp. The good news, is that God had grasped Nicodemus, and God would not let Nicodemus (or us) go.

Jesus makes it clear: God's word is LOVE. Our purpose is to love God, to love others, and to love ourselves. Jesus constantly reminds us that God always, always, always loves us. And God uses this love to heal the world.

Like us, I think Nicodemus is left with only one word. God's word is love in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God's word is love. Our word is *Thanks*.

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul  
O my soul—  
What wondrous love is this, O my soul?*

*For God's love—thanks be to God.*

*AMEN.*

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<sup>[1]</sup> Originally published in *The Faces of Jesus*, and on Frederick Buechner's webpage: <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2016/4/6/mad-as-a-hatter>