



# Ravensworth

## BAPTIST CHURCH

**March 5, 2023 | Second Sunday in Lent**

**John 3:1-17**

**Rev. Dr. Leah Grundset Davis, preaching**

---

We all long for meaningful conversation—a connection with another person. I learned this week that there are books about the art of conversation, how to carry one, how to appreciate a conversation, and how to start conversations.

Sometimes starting that conversation with someone you don't know well can be difficult. Here are the six ways *Success magazine* says to get a conversation going.

1. Lead with a compliment.
2. Embrace small talk
3. Ask lots of questions
4. Be nice
5. Let the other person do the talking. I don't know how that works if we both take these tips, but ok.
6. Keep it light.<sup>[1]</sup>

These suggestions would certainly work at a mixer, at a place where perhaps relationships aren't meant to be built so much as recognized. We long for deeper relationships in our lives though, we are seeking deeper relationships.

As we approach the third anniversary of the world turning upside down with the pandemic, I am aware that we missed in-person conversation with our

friends here at RBC for over a year. How did we begin again? Slowly and surely, by trusting one another and making the best decisions that we could, given the circumstances, together. We tossed around ideas, and went back and forth on language and dates and zoom log-ins and google calendars. We did all of it listening for Holy Spirit's guidance and through trusting each other.

Carolyn Blyth wrote the book, *The Art of Conversation*, saying, "Every day we use cell phones and computers to communicate, but it's easy to forget that we possess a communication technology that has been in research and development for thousands of years.

*The Art of Conversation* isn't about etiquette, elocution, or knowing how to hold your teacup with your little finger crooked just so. It's about something simple and profound: connecting. Conversation costs nothing, but can bring you the world, because it transcends the ability to talk to anyone. What transforms encounters into adventures is how we listen, laugh, flirt, and flatter. Blyth celebrates techniques for reading and changing minds, whether you're in a bar or a boardroom."<sup>[2]</sup> Or maybe an evening meetup with Jesus. OK, I added that last part.

We are seeking this Lenten series and last week we talked about how we listen, and who we listen to. What voices are making their way into our headspace? We read the passages that talked about Adam and Eve, and Jesus, all who encountered the tricky voice that caused them to question God and themselves. All three came to greater knowledge following those encounters.

This morning, we encounter a full-blown back-and-forth conversation in the Gospel of John, which ended in a mini-monologue from Jesus, which I'm certain would not be included on *Success Magazine's* list.

In fact, it's quite clear that Jesus did not read *Success Magazine*. He did not believe in keeping things light or leading with a compliment. He was not embracing small talk or even being nice. He only followed one rule: Ask lots of questions. Seek out the other person.

Nicodemus was a religious leader. By day he was seeking clarity of the law, serving the people, and likely doing a lot of admin work. By night, he was seeking Jesus and good conversation. He had questions for Jesus and wanted to know more. But there are some questions surrounding Nicodemus too.

As artist Carmelle Beaugelin, said, "It's risky for Nicodemus to go to Jesus at night. It matters what time and location these stories occur. If he gets caught, doesn't that look worse? What made this feel so high stakes that he couldn't just ask Jesus his questions directly during the daytime? What is underneath his questions? What risk is he trying to evade?"<sup>[3]</sup>

We don't know much about Nicodemus—who sent him, what was going on with him, what questions we had. But we do know, he must have read *Success Magazine* because when he meets Jesus he says, "Rabbi, we know that you are teacher who has come with God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Compliment.

Jesus responds with a funny statement, "Very truly," he says, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.

Nicodemus, taking Jesus' statement quite literally, perhaps taken aback by Jesus' abruptness, asked Jesus how an old man could go back into his mother's womb. And this paves the way for Jesus' two mini-monologues.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born from above and that the spirit blows where it chooses, it's source cannot be known, that's how the Spirit moves.

Nicodemus, still wondering what all this could be about, perhaps a bit wide-eyes and hopeful while listening to Jesus asks, “How can this be?” I hear that as saying, “Can that be true, even for me? I could begin again?”

Jesus assures him, that they are speaking of what they know and testifying to what they have seen. Jesus alludes the Genesis passage, when he makes his super famous statement in verse 16—that God so loved the world that everyone who believes, might have eternal life—limitless, expansive, liberating life.

Can Nicodemus begin again at this moment? He is an adult? What does it mean to turn from what he has always known, now that an encounter with Jesus has turned him on his head? What does it mean to be born again while recognizing the impossibilities of doing so without making big changes to the systems, relationships, and conversations that connect us? Nicodemus pops up two more times in the Gospel of John. Once in chapter 7, when the religious leaders want to arrest Jesus, they are tired of his teachings, the crowds. And Nicodemus has this conversation with his colleagues:

“Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, <sup>51</sup>‘Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?’ <sup>52</sup>They replied, ‘Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.’

He was beginning again.

Then, much later on in chapter 19, he accompanied Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus, following the crucifixion.

Even in death, Nicodemus was beginning again.

Nicodemus, is a faithful disciple. The one who came to Jesus in the middle of the night, spoke up, disrupted those in power, and finally, cared for his broken

and beaten body, ensuring that Jesus had a safe place to rest. All because of a conversation.

I wonder when he left the grave that day if he said, “how can these things be?” If he did, even in that moment he was beginning again.

Is it possible for us to begin again? Jesus would say yes.

Is it possible for us to look at ourselves as individuals and then as this community of faith and begin again? Jesus would say yes.

During the season of Lent, we are seeking. Are we seeking to begin again? Beginning can be tiring and yet we do not begin alone.

Here we find ourselves, RBC at the beginning of another lay leadership year, and at the threshold of a new fiscal year soon. Are we ready to begin again? Are we tired? Maybe. And if so, that’s when we might just find Jesus, in the welcoming dark, inviting us to begin again, and again, and again. Can we begin again in relationships if the first step in doing so is admitting we were wrong and ask for forgiveness. Yep.

Can we begin again with a meaningful conversation over a cup of coffee. I hope so—sign me up!

Can we begin again if we aren’t quite sure where to go next and the path to Jesus in the dark isn’t clear? You know it. And the good news is that you aren’t alone on that path.

Can we begin again when the task of confronting our whiteness feels overwhelming? We must.

Can we begin again when line items in our budget get a little tighter and we might have to re-work some of our plans? Absolutely.

Can we begin again alongside trusted beloveds as we seek to share love, do justice, and build community? Oh, for sure.

How do we begin again, and again, and again? Alongside one another, following God our Creator, Jesus our teacher, and Holy Spirit our guide. May it be so. Amen.

---

[1] Larry Alton, *Success Magazine*, "[6 Tips to Rule the Art of Conversation.](#)"

[2] Carolyn Blyth, [The Art of Conversation Amazon listing](#).

[3] Carmelle Beaugelin, *A Sanctified Art*, Sermon Planning Guide, Second Sunday in Lent.