

Truth or Dare part 5

Part 5 – Scratching where people itch

John 3:1-8 (NIV)

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." ³ In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." ⁴ "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Throughout this series of "Truth and Dare" we have been challenged to dare to talk truth about our faith. For these final two Sundays I want to get super practical and ask the question, if we get into a conversation with someone about faith; what should we talk about? Now the problem is not a scarcity of faith related subjects, the problem is deciding which one of the hundreds of faith related subjects would be helpful and equally important which subjects would be a waste of time. For example, back in the day I was in the front of our house in Guildford feverishly trying to fix something on my motorbike when this guy in a suit walked up and began to talk to me about caring for my family. It took me some time to work out that he was selling burial plots. He was trying to sell burial plots to a 23 year old, long haired youth pastor with a dodgy motor cycle and a brand new baby. Suffice it so say, this was so not a conversation I was remotely interested in. Eventually, just to get rid of him, I told him I already had one. He blinked a couple of times and said, "well I hope you'll be very happy there". Trying to tell people about things they have no interest in is a waste of time, so how do we find the most helpful subject or entry point for our faith conversations? A good place to start is to scratch where people are itching, which means to talk about those things which are on people's minds.

Now this is not what Paul is talking about when he warns about scratching itching ears.

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. (2 Timothy 4:3)

In that passage Paul is talking about people who just want to hear what they want to hear. They want to hear "yes you're terrific, nothing you do is ever wrong it's just the universe misunderstanding you". Ear tickling is telling people what they want to hear, scratching where people itch is telling people what they need to hear. A good example of this takes place in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3.

Scratching where people itch

1. Keep in step with the Spirit
2. Listen Deeply
3. Ask good questions
4. Address the big worry
5. Open the word
6. Introduce Jesus
7. Trust and pray

Scratching where people itch

When Nicodemus comes to Jesus he has a big itch that needs scratching and the first give-a-way is that Nicodemus comes at night, which means that he feels uncomfortable about seeing Jesus and he doesn't want anyone to know he's seeing Jesus, but he's also desperate to see Jesus, he has an itch about something. You see that's the story of most people, they have mixed feelings about God. They want to know but they don't want to know. They hate the idea of church but are intrigued by the idea of a loving God. They believe churches are just after your money but they give generously to the Salvation Army. They consider an hour at church a total waste of their time but they will give up hours to talk with you about their deepest spiritual thoughts over a beer. People are complicated and while there are no-go areas that people will not talk about there are also many areas of interest that people will want to talk about, itchy areas in their lives, and the trick is to understand what those areas are, which is what Jesus is doing in this story.

Nicodemus says to Jesus: *Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. - For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.*" (John 3:2).

For some reason people rarely begin conversations with what they really want to talk about, we tend to beat around the bush a little. Nicodemus begins "*We know you are a teacher who has come from God*" which is just nonsense because the Pharisees don't believe that Jesus is Godly at all (John 8:13, 48). It is Nicodemus himself, coming to Jesus in the dark of the night, who is wondering if Jesus is from God, which is something that really bothers him. Nicodemus is a teacher of the law, all his life he has been teaching about Abraham and Moses and their amazing experiences with God. Now nothing like that has ever happened to Nicodemus, which is OK it's not supposed to work like that. Nicodemus has the Law of Moses and that's all he needs to follow God, until he saw Jesus. Jesus baffles him. Jesus spoke like no teacher he had ever heard and did things, miraculous things, which he had never seen before ever, and something began to really itch in Nicodemus. Is this real? Can God be here, now, in front of me? "*For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.*" Nicodemus's itch is to know if God can personally be experienced like Abraham and Moses. So Jesus goes right to the itch and begins to talk to him about how to enter into the reality of the

power and presence of God, you must be born again says Jesus, of water and the spirit (John 3:3-5).

1. Keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:28)

Now Jesus knew immediately what Nicodemus was itching about because of his perfect relationship with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16) which enabled him to discern Nicodemus heart. (Mark 2:8, Luke 5:22, Matthew 12:25). However that same Holy Spirit also grants us certain insights into people. Paul talks about the Spiritual gifts of knowledge and wisdom (1 Corinthians 12:8) which are examples of the Holy Spirit helping us to understand things which would normally be hidden. An example of this is in Acts 16, Paul and Silas are arrested and imprisoned in Philippi, but one night a violent earthquake shakes the doors of the prison free waking up the jailer who assumes that all the prisoners have escaped. Now the penalty for a jailer letting a prisoner escape is life imprisonment in his own jail, I suppose it's some kind of an efficiency incentive plan. Anyhow, terrified of never seeing the light of day again the jailer decides to take his own life by falling on his sword. However inside the darkness of the jail the Holy Spirit gives Paul some insight into what is going on in the jailer's heart even though Paul can't see the jailer and it causes Paul to suddenly call out, *"don't harm yourself we are all here"*. Shocked, the jailer calls for lights and moves into the jail proper and by the flickering torches sees Paul and Silas and all the prisoners' still where they were supposed to be. But the Holy Spirit is not finished yet, the Holy Spirit knew that while one big itch in the jailers life was the fear of prisoners escaping, there was an even bigger itch, an ever present darkness in the jailers own soul and as he looked into the faces of men who were more free than he had ever been, he asks them; *"what must I do to be saved"* (Acts 16:29), and they spoke the word of the Lord to the Jailer and he gave his life to Jesus. This is the gift of knowledge and wisdom, believing that God's heart is to help people by bringing the right word, for the right person at the right time.

(Jesus taught that if we appear before a magistrate over our faith we are not to ...worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. (Mark 13:11). Our openness to the Holy Spirit is a daily choice to look to God.)

2. Listen deeply

Because we are not Jesus we will not always have perfect insight into what's going on for people and most of the time we see life through a mirror dimly (1 Corinthians 12). Because of this, one of the great skills to cultivate for anyone who wants to care for anyone else, is deep listening. Deep listening resists using listening as a springboard to say stuff. Deep listening fully focuses in the moment on the other person without pushing our own agenda, voicing our opinion, or offering advice. Deep Listening is more than just hearing, it is the desire to understand another person's heart. This is what God does, deep listening:

In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears. (Psalms 18:6)

James the brother of Jesus advises believers to always make listening your first priority.

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, (James 1:19)

Hints for deep listening

- Resist the urge to jump in when there's a pause – deep listening welcome gaps and silence
- Extend open-ended invitations and cues to the speaker to share more if they wish – e.g.: “Tell me more...,” “I hear you...,” “I’m listening...”
- Constantly wonder; “What does this mean for this person”?
- Test out your perceptions by asking clarifying questions such as; “does this mean you feel X about Y?”
- If you find your mind wandering, use the speaker’s voice to bring you back to the present moment

3. Ask good questions

The physicist Werner Heisenberg said that; *what we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.* The right question is also a powerful key to understand a person’s heart.

A few hints for good questions

- Avoid Yes or No Questions, so no; “would,” “should,” “is,” “are,” and “do” questions. Rather ask “who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” “how,” or “why”, these questions open doors in people.
- Go Deeper – ask good follow up questions such as; “What makes you say that?” or “Why do you think that?”
- Respect the Power of Silence to draw people out
- Don’t Interrupt - stops the train of thought
- Listen deeply and identify the big worry
- Ask clarifying questions.

4. Address the big worry

If we keep in step with the Spirit, if we listen deeply, if we ask good questions, we will begin to discern our friend’s biggest worries, and our friend’s biggest worries will be their biggest itches. These will be the things they need to talk about and these will be the things that God wants to help them with. Nicodemus’s big worry was that he had wasted a good chunk of his life failing at the one thing he wanted to be; a good teacher. Jesus addressed Nicodemus big worry head on when he said; “*You are Israel’s teacher,*” said Jesus, “*and do you not understand these things?* (John 3:10). Jesus is a big believer in naming things and ripping off that band-aide. But we tend to avoid hard truths because the truth can hurt, it can make us feel guilty or anxious or disappointed – disappointed - now that’s a tough word, we would rather our dad said almost anything but the words, “I am disappointed in you” – you know?

For most of us, taking a good hard look at ourselves revives memories of profound moments of humiliation. The truth can be painful but the truth will also set us free, so the most valuable person in my life is the one who helps me name my biggest worries and gives me the courage to face them by talking about them.

5. Open the Word

So are you getting a feel for how this works? As we talk with people, as we keep in step with the Spirit, as we listen deeply, as we ask good questions and as we address the big worry we now have the opportunity to open God's word with our friends because we have a particular worry, a particular itch in our friend's life that can be addressed and scratched by the power of God's word. Next week I'll demonstrate with some real life examples how we move from addressing some big worries, such as a fear of the future, to opening the word of God where it directly speaks into that fear. But for today I just want us to recognise the principle:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

The word of God with the Help of God's Spirit will do the heavy lifting because it has power to speak into people's lives, all we need to do is help people open their lives to God's word, which is what this process is all about.

This is what is happening in the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, Jesus discerns the big worry in Nicodemus life and begins to speak the word into that big worry because Jesus is the word, Jesus is speaking the word and while that word begins with a how it has to end in a who.

6. Introduce Jesus

The heart and soul of the gospel is that the answer to peoples big worry's and life questions are not a what but a who. Our task is to introduce people to Jesus and challenge them to give their lives to the son of God. The story of Nicodemus is John's example of this Christian mission, meeting people, identifying their itch and then introducing them to Jesus as the answer because *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)*. In Christian witnessing all roads eventually have to lead to Jesus and it must be part of our Christian consciousness that sometime, somewhere, somehow, we are called to proclaim Jesus to our friends.

7. Trust and pray

Finally, in witnessing be content with obedience and leave success to God.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

Being anxious about the results of our witnessing simply adds an extra tension to the mix that you can do without and your friends can do without. We are simply part of a wonderful story that is being written in somebodies life but we share that story with God's Holy Spirit and a cast of hundreds and it's good to learn to be content with that. It is not an accident that in this primary story about sharing the gospel in John 3, Nicodemus just fades from the story, he disappears for a while because that's what usually happens. People take time to think things through, particularly new things, they need time to process. But John is also very clear, God is at work in people's lives, trust him and pray.

³⁸ Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. ³⁹ He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. ⁴⁰ Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. (John 19:38-40)