Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Once upon a time, there was a woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. First she read everything she could get her hands on--history, philosophy, psychology, religion. While she became a very smart person, nothing she read gave her the answer to the meaning of life. She found other smart people and asked them about the meaning of life, but while their discussions were long and lively, no two of them agreed on the same thing and still she had no answer.

Finally, she put all her belongings in storage and set off in search of the meaning of life. She went to South America. She went to India. Everywhere she went, people told her they did not know the meaning of life, but they had heard of a man who did, only they were not sure where he lived. She asked about him in every country she visited until finally, deep in the Himalayas, someone told her how to reach his house--a tiny little hut perched on the side of a mountain just below tree line.

Arriving in the land separating China from Nepal, she climbed and climbed to reach his front door. When she finally got there, with knuckles so cold they hardly worked, she knocked.

"Yes?" said the kind-looking old man who opened it. She thought she would die of happiness.

"I have come halfway around the world to ask you one question," she said, gasping for breath. "What is the meaning of life?"

"Please come in and have some tea," the old man said.

"No," she said. "I mean, no thank you. I didn't come all this way for tea. I came for an answer. Won't you tell me, please, what is the meaning of life?"

"We shall have tea," the old man said, so she gave up and went inside. While he was brewing the tea she caught her breath and began telling him about all the books she had read, all the people she had met, all the places she had been. The old man listened (which was just as well, since his visitor did not leave any room for him to reply), and as she talked he placed a fragile tea cup in her hand. Then he began to pour the tea. She was so busy talking that she did not notice when the tea cup was full, so the old man just kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides of the cup and spilled to the floor in a steaming waterfall.

"What are you doing?!" she yelled when the tea burned her hand. "It's full, can't you see that? Stop! There's no more room!"

"Just so," the old man said to her. "You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There is no more room in your cup. Come back when it is empty and then we will talk."

Meanwhile, several thousand miles to the west, a ruler of the Jews named Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. This night, Nicodemus was searching to believe something more about God. Jesus and this inquiring gentleman dispensed with a tea ritual, but the intent was the same. Nicodemus came looking for answers:

‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” The royal “we” of which Nicodemus spoke was to add weight to the inquiry. Apparently others in his acquaintance were looking to believe something more about God, too.

While Jesus didn’t offer Nicodemus tea, like the old man in the Himalayas did to the woman looking for the answer to the meaning of life, in effect, Jesus poured tea all over his visitor’s hand. He said, that Nicodemus, himself a smart and educated Jew, already had gallons of answers available to him. What Jesus said he needed was one drop - one moment of new birth, and then he could leave all his own answers lying in puddles on the
floor. “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Jesus’ answer left Nicodemus flummoxed.

This birth Jesus talks about isn’t plain birth – getting your mom to let you back in so she can push you out again. “No one enters the kingdom of God without being born from above,” Jesus said.

Nicodemus realized he is in over his head. This teacher named Jesus, who apparently is from God turns out to be a Zen teacher, Nicodemus thought to himself. “How can these things be, Jesus?” That is all Nicodemus says. But Jesus isn’t done.

“Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you don’t understand, Nicodemus? Jesus inquired, not out of meanness, but more so, irony.

When Nicodemus protested that he did not know what Jesus was talking about, Jesus said, "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

Part of the problem, I think, was the difference between what Jesus meant when he said "believe" and what Nicodemus meant by the same word. On one level, to believe someone means simply to accept what that person says as true, usually on the basis of some evidence.

For example, a friend shows you a picture of himself climbing the rock face of a mountain and tells you it can be done, and you say, "I believe you." You accept the proposition. You give your intellectual assent, but that does not make any difference with the way you live your life, because this belief is all in your head.

On another level, belief is much more visceral. Instead of simply showing you the pictures, your friend invites you to go rock climbing with him. You accept. As you arrive at the climb site, your friend properly encumbers you with all the harnesses and straps for the climb. Then, just before you start out, your knowledgeable rock climbing friend re-checks the contraptions that have been placed in alarmingly snug spots on your body. The final step in the preparation involves your friend running a safety line from you through the carabineer around his own waist. As he does, he notices not only your discomfort, but your distress. Your friend assures you that everything will be all right. Your proper response at that point is not "I believe you" but "I believe in you," because you are way past anything like intellectual assent. Believing now is visceral – it involves all of you – lock, stock and body. You have set yourself in relationship with this person, and you are trusting him with your life. And up the rock face you go – believing in this person to whom you have tied yourself.

Nicodemus was halfway there that night. He came to interview the new teacher in town. He knew Jesus was good and he suspected that what people were seeing in this guy was an attestation to the presence of God. Nicodemus had checked his references, but he wanted more information. He wanted to see the gear. He wanted to handle the equipment, maybe try it on for size. He wanted the teacher to say something that would take away his doubts and make it easy for him to say yes to this belief about God, but the teacher would not cooperate.

Believe in me. That was Jesus' dare to Nicodemus. Turn your cup upside down. Open up your soul, Nicodemus. Turn your mind inside out. Step outside of all your own notions. Be born anew, a live.

"How can this be?" Those are Nicodemus's last words in this passage, which makes him a sort of patron saint for all of us who get stuck at the foot of the mountain, looking up, without the faintest idea of how to begin.

“Here is how to begin”, Jesus says. “Watch me. Put your hand here. Now bring up your foot. Don't think about it too hard. Just do as I do. Believe me. Believe in me, ‘for God so loved the world’ … and when we get to the top, we will have some tea.” Amen.

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