

The following material is fiction based on John 3.1-9, 7.50-52, 19.38-42. You will want to read both the scripture and the following story before your class session and reflect on both the similarities and the differences between the story and the scriptures.



Session Seven

Nicodemus the Pharisee

I am Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Great Sanhedrin, the supreme religious court of all Judaism. The Greeks call the Sanhedrin “the Senate” but we are not a law-making body. We interpret the Jewish laws and, sometimes, we take action to see that the laws are enforced.

The Sanhedrin is made up of 71 priests called Sadducees and lay religious leaders called Pharisees. And, about two thirds of these are also lawyers called “scribes.” Most of the Sadducees are from the group of aristocratic families from which the high priests are always chosen. They are the “chief priests” that run the Temple and who get to keep most of the income that comes from Temple activities. The Pharisees on the Sanhedrin, like me, also come from aristocratic families even though the Pharisees are generally the party of the common people. The number 71 supposedly dates back to the time of Moses when he chose 70 elders of the twelve Hebrew tribes to help him govern.

Even though we are all committed to protecting the Jewish religious laws, the Sadducees and Pharisees have some major differences that reflect on the way in which we interpret the laws.

In general, the Sadducees are from old-line aristocratic families, big landowners, members of the royal family, and hereditary members of the high priesthood. They are primarily concentrated in the bigger cities of Jerusalem and Tiberius and they have a vested interest in maintaining good relations with the Roman overlords because they benefit from the economic and political stability the Romans provide. They also place more emphasis on the religious rules that support Temple activities because the income of many of them is tied directly to the Temple. As long as the people keep coming to the Temple to pay to have sacrifices performed, the Sadducees do very well.

But, the Sadducees are not as interested in supporting the minutia of laws that regulate the daily lives of the Jewish people and, in fact, many of them are pretty casual about the dietary rules and the rules about what is clean and what is unclean in daily behavior. They believe that the only laws that can be enforced are those that are written in the Torah and they don't believe that there will be a Judgment Day when the dead will be resurrected and judged.

On the other hand, the Pharisees – my party – are primarily the party of the common people. We are everywhere in the land and, in many rural areas and small villages, we are the only religious force. We do not like the presence of the Romans in our land because we believe the Gentiles to be unclean and that contact with them causes us to be unclean. We mostly emphasize the religious rules that impact the daily lives of the people because we feel that salvation and righteousness comes from strict adherence to the Jewish laws. As long as the people believe that their salvation depends upon following the religious rules they will need Pharisees to interpret the laws for them.

We believe that the oral laws which have been passed on for generations by the rabbis and scribes are just as important as the written laws in the Torah and that every individual must rigidly adhere to each and every law, both written and oral, to be saved. And, we believe adamantly in the final resurrection of the dead and that, on the great Day of Judgment, people will be judged by how well they have followed the Jewish religious laws.

Of course, the Sadducees pretty well control the Sanhedrin because they have the power to perpetuate themselves on the council. The smaller number of Pharisees in the Sanhedrin – like myself and Joseph of Arimathea and Gamaliel — are there because of our scholarship. We have so many students and our ideas are so well respected that the Sadducee power structure has to recognize us. But, we will never be a majority on

the Sanhedrin even though the Pharisee party represents the majority of the people.

The time that I really wish that we could have been a majority on the Sanhedrin was when the council dealt with the Galilean rabbi called Jesus. Ultimately, he was convicted of blasphemy by the court and sentenced to execution by the Romans. But, I never felt he was guilty of anything except some creative — and possibly misguided — theological thinking.

I had heard some of the rabbi's teachings because I went to him one night when he was visiting Jerusalem about a year earlier. He was staying in the olive garden called Gethsemane with his students and I went to visit with him because I had heard about him and wanted to learn about his teaching. I went at night because, even then, I was afraid that contact with him could endanger my position.

He received me as a fellow teacher of religion. He was respectful and friendly, even playful at times. I liked him a lot even before I heard his ideas. He had one of the sharpest religious minds I had ever encountered and I found myself asking more and more questions, wanting to absorb every idea he had. He knew all the teachings of the ancient rabbis better than anyone I had ever talked with but he was even more impressive when he applied his own thinking to religious questions.

I remember, in particular, his teaching about being born a second time. He said that every person had been born of flesh but, to enter into the kingdom of God, each person had to be born again of the Spirit. That was a remarkable idea! It was a powerful illustration of the kind of religious change that we see happen in people everyday. Sometimes persons that have been fighting against faith all their lives, suddenly find it. It is certainly like they have just been reborn as new persons.

But, some of Jesus' ideas were more difficult for me. He said, for instance, that salvation would come through people's belief in him rather than through their adherence to the Jewish religious laws. The minute I heard him say it, I knew some would interpret it as blasphemy. He was assuming himself to be God and he was denying the most important tenets of our faith. How could such a powerful religious mind drift into that kind of heresy?

About six months before he was executed, the council began to be aware of him. Some of the scribes and police that serve the Sanhedrin were sent to hear his preaching and report back to us. When they were asked why they did not arrest him, they said, "Never has anyone spoken

like this man!” Many of the members of the Sanhedrin were angry and felt like their own people had been duped by this country rabbi. The Pharisees like myself on the council chaffed at that reference because many of us were merely “country rabbis” ourselves.

I spoke up, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing does it?” They accused me of being from Galilee because I was speaking up for the rabbi. And, they arrogantly declared that no prophet could ever come out of rural Galilee!

The Sanhedrin kept dealing with the “Jesus problem” in meeting after meeting. They kept sending out spies to gather evidence against him and, each time they returned, the members of the Sanhedrin would get more and more hostile. They began demanding that the rabbi had to be silenced, that he had to be stopped.

We kept sending police to catch Jesus but he kept eluding us. We would hear that he was preaching everyday on a hillside in Galilee but, by the time our police got there, he would be gone. Then, we would get a report that he was teaching on a Jerusalem street corner but, by the time our police arrived he would have disappeared.

Then, reports came to us that Jesus had returned to the Jerusalem area because of the death of his friend Lazarus in the little suburb of Bethany. And, many people were saying that Jesus had actually brought Lazarus back to life after he had been in the tomb for four days! The members of the Sanhedrin were troubled because they were hearing more and more signs about the powers of Jesus. And, this one was greater than all the others. But, some of us wondered, what if it is true. Maybe this is the work of God and we are trying to stop it.

When this report about the resurrection of Lazarus came in, the high priest, Caiphas, made one of his rare appearances before the Sanhedrin. He addressed the council and said, “It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” And, that day, the Sanhedrin voted the death penalty for Jesus. No one voted against the death penalty but I abstained and I noticed that Joseph of Arimathea and Gamaliel also abstained. It was about all we could do. If we had voted against it, we would have probably died with him.

A few days later, Jesus boldly rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, blatantly pretending to be the Messiah. Hundreds of people lined the streets and threw down palm leaves and lined the streets with their cloaks. They shouted “Hosanna!” and identified him as the new David come to rescue Jerusalem from its enemies. Immediately, the forces of the high priest

and the Sanhedrin leapt into action and, a couple of days later, Jesus was arrested.

They arrested Jesus during the night after the Passover suppers in Jerusalem when most of the population was drunk and sound asleep. The high priest, Caiaphas, paid a follower of Jesus by the name of Judas Iscariot to betray him and a century of soldiers and police found the rabbi in the olive garden called Gethsemane and arrested him. Caiaphas gathered a small group of his most loyal people on the Sanhedrin to his palace to hold the trial. Of course, I wasn't invited. Neither was Joseph or Gamaliel. We heard about everything after Jesus was already on the cross!

When I heard that Jesus had been crucified I was heartsick. We weren't supposed to be executioners. We were supposed to make judgments that would guide the people to greater faith in God. This rabbi may have been the most creative mind to surface in our area in a thousand years — and we killed him!

I was so troubled that I immediately went to the villa of my dear friend, Joseph of Arimathea. When I arrived, I found him in tears. Joseph was more than just interested in the teachings of Jesus, as I was. He had become a committed follower of Jesus and was in deep despair about his crucifixion.

Joseph said he had gone to Pontius Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus so that he could have a proper burial. I cautioned him about the danger but, with tears forming in his eyes, he told me that Jesus had meant more to him than anything in his entire life. He firmly believed that Jesus had been the Son of God and that, somehow, his death was bringing about the salvation of all humans, everywhere. And, he was going to make certain that Jesus received a proper burial. He was even going to contribute a brand new rock-hewn tomb that he had purchased for himself so that Jesus could be properly buried.

I thought he was hallucinating but he was my dearest friend and I was determined to help him in any way that I could. "Joseph," I said, "I have a hundred pounds of spiced burial ointment sitting in the back room of my villa. I bought it when I thought my niece was going to die but she recovered."

Joseph leapt up. "That's wonderful," he cried, "let's take it and prepare his body for burial. The women and the teenage disciple, John, are at the cross but they aren't allowed to take the body down. Pilate gave me permission to take the body and we can prepare his body and put him in my tomb."

We left his villa on the slope they called Mount Zion and walked to the place outside the western gate of the city. There, we found Jesus' mother, Mary, a woman they called Mary of Magdala, another woman called Salome Zebedee, and the teen age disciple they called John. Jesus was clearly dead and they were just sitting and weeping, not knowing what to do.

They seemed overjoyed when we arrived. Joseph had a papyrus from Pontius Pilate giving him permission to take the body and I had a large jar with enough spiced ointment to properly prepare Jesus' body. It was Friday evening and we had to get the body down and prepared and into the tomb before sunset which signaled the beginning of Sabbath.

We took him down off the cross. I kept fighting back tears as we pulled the massive nails from his wrists and ankles. They had put a crown of thorns on his head and streaks of blood striped his face. There was a huge gash in his side where the soldiers had stabbed him. And, I was horrified when we got his body down and I saw that his back was an ocean of open flesh where they had beat him with the knife-tipped Roman scourging whips.

Why had they tortured him? Wasn't it enough to kill this man of God? I looked over at Joseph as we lifted the body down from the cross and there were streams of tears flowing down both his cheeks. He must have loved the rabbi a lot.

At that moment, I knew we had killed the Son of God. My heart ached!

Reflection Questions

1. *Even though Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea became believers in Jesus, most were hostile. Why do you think the religious leaders of Jesus' time were opposed to him?*
2. *Why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus only under cover of night?*
3. *Why do you think Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were willing to risk being involved in the burial of Jesus when they were not publically involved with him during his ministry?*