

Joseph and Nicodemus: Faith Under Fire

[John 19:38-42](#)

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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If you saw the movie "Amadeus," you will remember the rain-soaked funeral procession near the end of the film. A rickety farm wagon moves slowly through the streets of Vienna, bearing a coffin which contains the body of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. When it reaches the cemetery, his body is dumped unceremoniously into a large pit, already half-filled with paupers. Mozart died at the age of 35, penniless, friendless, and in disgrace, so he ended up in a potter's field. Jesus was about the same age when he was executed, and his body would also have been dumped in a potter's field had not Joseph and Nicodemus screwed up their courage, asked Governor Pilate for the body, bought the spices and the shroud, and given him a decent burial.

In my judgment, Joseph and Nicodemus are among the unsung heroes of the faith, for they demonstrated great courage when it really counted. Well, would you have had the nerve to bury Jesus? Would you have identified yourself with a man who was put to death for high treason? Not one of his disciples was willing to do it. I'm not sure I would be willing to do it. After all, if Pilate had executed Jesus, what was to keep him from killing his supporters? In addition, there was a strong religious rationale that should have kept Joseph and Nicodemus from even touching Jesus' body. The Old Testament clearly states, "A hanged man is accursed by God." (Deuteronomy 21:23) Jesus was hanged! Would you soil your hands on the body of a man apparently damned by God?

Yet these two men did not hesitate even for a moment. And when I ask about the source of their courage, I cannot chalk it up to the fact that they were highly religious people. With due respect to the twenty-six persons joining National Church today, not to mention the 2,675 others who are currently on our membership rolls, mere church membership does not engender this brand of courage. Look at the charter members of Jesus' church: they are all hiding somewhere in the back alleys of Jerusalem for fear that Pilate's police will now come after them. No, something more than membership is needed to generate faith under fire.

Joseph and Nicodemus weren't even typical church members. They didn't attend Jesus' public seminars, or if they did they stood at the far edge of the crowd where they could remain anonymous. We first meet Nicodemus in John 3 when he arrives under cover of darkness to interview Jesus. Apparently he didn't want a CNN cameraman to catch him hobnobbing with a man already suspected of heresy. In chapter 7 John describes Nicodemus as a member of Israel's ruling elite. So it's clear he was trying to keep a foot in both camps, to retain his standing in society while remaining open to the teachings of this fascinating young man Jesus.

And what about Joseph? Joseph, John writes, "was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews." (John 19:38) Yet it was these two clandestine disciples who risked their reputations if not their lives to give Jesus a decent burial. It was not Peter, first among the apostles. It was not John who was perhaps closer to Jesus than any other. It was not Andrew who had been so enthusiastic about Jesus early on. It was two men who came to worship only at Christmas and Easter, persons who, when they did come to church, preferred the back pews where no one could see them.

So again, what was the source of their courage? The first and most obvious answer is, they did this daring deed together. Joseph got permission from Pilate; Nicodemus purchased the spices; together they wrapped the body in a linen shroud and laid it in the tomb. Courage is rarely a singular affair. Read about the martyrs, from Stephen in the New Testament to Martin Luther King in our own day, and you will find them surrounded by a cadre equally committed to the cause. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was another twentieth century martyr. Perhaps you have read his "Letters and Papers from Prison." Bonhoeffer was a young Lutheran theologian who was implicated in a plot to kill Adolph Hitler. He was arrested and thrown in prison. And as you read those poignant letters, written under threat of imminent death, you can't help but feel the strength Bonhoeffer derived from his family and friends. Then, two days before his death, his fellow-prisoners asked him to conduct a worship service. And there he was, surrounded by Christian friends when the door burst open and two men said, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, take your things and come with us." He turned to a British prisoner of war and asked him to convey a message to his good friend Bishop George Bell: "Tell him that for me this is the end, but also the beginning." "The end—but also the beginning." That's faith under fire, and it's a nearly impossible feat if one tries to walk through the fire alone, but eminently possible when others walk with us. Joseph and Nicodemus did the daring deed together!

But the ultimate source of their faith under fire has to be Jesus himself. Not just Jesus the teacher; many before and after have imparted teachings as moral and as meaningful as his. Nor just Jesus the miracle worker; others before and after have healed the sick and cast out demons. Not even Jesus the incarnate Son of God; that discovery would dawn on them only after Easter Sunday when Jesus rose from the dead.

I believe Jesus was the source of their courage because they found in Jesus what Philip Yancey calls, "A sinless friend of sinners." In his book "The Jesus I Never Knew," Yancey writes, "He commended a groveling tax collector over a God-fearing Pharisee. The first person to whom he openly revealed himself as Messiah was a Samaritan woman who had a history of five failed marriages and was currently living with yet another man. With his dying breath he pardoned a thief who would have zero opportunity for spiritual growth." In other words, Jesus was a sinless friend of sinners. And even though the accounts of Joseph and Nicodemus in the New Testament are brief and sketchy, we can safely assume that in the presence of Jesus they found themselves as forgiven, accepted, and loved by Jesus as any of his chosen twelve. And when it comes right down to it, nothing is more imperative for any human being than to experience absolute forgiveness, than to feel unreserved acceptance, than to obtain unconditional love.

In Orson Welles' film, "Citizen Kane" the wealthy publisher and failed presidential candidate dies with the word "Rosebud" on his lips. And no one knows who Rosebud is, not his wife, not his advisors, not the investigative reporters who scour the files, thinking it must be the name of an old girl friend. Not until the end of the film, when the servants are throwing junk into the furnace, does the

audience see the name "Rosebud" printed on the sled Kane was using when, as a small child, he was ripped away from his home and family and set on a course that would give him everything the world could offer: fame, power, wealth, everything, that is, except unconditional love. His boyhood sled, Rosebud, represented the family he lost and the love he never found again.

Joseph and Nicodemus had fame, power, and wealth; but they found forgiveness, acceptance, and unconditional love only in Jesus. In that marvelous dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, recorded in John 3, Jesus states unequivocally, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Nicodemus, secret disciple though he was, was the first to hear those words, words that in time have become the Golden Text of the Bible, the very epitome of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."

And Joseph saw that love poured out as he stood at the foot of Calvary on Good Friday. No wonder they responded with a courage that could walk right up to the man who condemned Jesus and ask for the body. No wonder they could take that body right out from under the noses of the soldiers who crucified Jesus and who could just as easily crucify them. No risk is too great for this sinless friend of sinners. And no task is too tough if another human being walks at our side.

The motto of the French Foreign Legion states, in part, "If I falter, push me on; if I stumble, pick me up." When the battle is hot and your courage cold, make this your prayer to Almighty God: "If I falter, push me on; if I stumble, pick me up." Pray that prayer and you will discover that God has already answered it in, for example, Isaiah 41:10, "Fear not, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." When you need courage, there is no friend so loyal as your God. When you are weak, there is no strength so splendid as God's victorious right hand.