

When I was a teenager, our church youth group would often attend large youth retreats and conferences with kids from other churches. Generally they were a lot of fun, had great music, and very charismatic speakers. But growing up in the heart of the Bible belt like I did, a few of these conferences also had a very specific brand of Christianity they wanted us to subscribe to and if I could describe that brand in one word, it would be boldness.

We were told that we need to boldly take a stand for Christ.

We needed to boldly tell others about Christ.

And one way you could boldly live out your faith, we were told, was to buy the Christian t-shirt they were selling at the conference with a Bible verse printed on it from Romans where Paul says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is God’s saving power for everyone who believes.”

If we wanted to be good Christians, we couldn’t be ashamed of being a Christian. We had to be bold in living our faith, in talking about our faith, even wearing clothes with the message of our faith.

And while I think there is a lot to be said for boldly living out our faith, today I understand that in a very different way than the perspective I heard at those youth retreats. You see, at some of those retreats, they often reduced faith to a binary – you were either a person of strong faith or you weren’t. But that binary dismisses the idea that I think is so central to the gospel of Jesus Christ, namely that God meets us wherever we are.

In the UCC, our mantra is, “Whoever you are or wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” That’s the same sentiment expressed in our mission statement – “we are an open Christian community for ALL to belong.”

We don’t have to have it all figured out. We don’t have to be ready to shout our faith on the street corner. We don’t have to buy the t-shirt. We don’t even have to be sure that we are a Christian for God to meet us where we are.

“Whoever you are or wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” I think we could also say, “Whoever you are or wherever you are in your exploration of faith, God will meet you there.”

We have a great example of this in our gospel reading today. Nicodemus came to see Jesus in the dead of night because he wasn’t ready for anyone to see him with Jesus. Nicodemus was a Jewish religious leader, respected by his community. He had a reputation to uphold and, being seen with Jesus, might not undo that reputation, but it would certainly raise questions.

I think Nicodemus also wasn’t sure what to make of Jesus. He wasn’t ready to become one of his followers. But he was intrigued. He wanted to learn more. So he approached Jesus in a way that felt right for him.

And Jesus met him where he was on his life’s journey.

Nicodemus begins by telling Jesus why he was drawn to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God for no one can do these signs apart from the presence of God.” Nicodemus came to Jesus because word had spread of Jesus’ miracles. He had seen enough to know that there was something about this Jesus guy.

But for Jesus, faith is not about believing in supernatural miracles. At the very end of chapter 2, it tells us that Jesus would not entrust himself to people who were only interested in him because of the signs or miracles he performed. Jesus did not come to be our genie in a bottle. So almost ignoring Nicodemus’ comment, Jesus cuts right to the chase, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born”and this is where it gets confusing. The Greek word is *anōthen* and it can mean born again or born from above.

No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again OR no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.

In English, we have to pick a translation – again or above. But the word *anōthen*, actually means both – it has a double meaning. We don’t have a comparable word in English. By using that word, John is telling us that we must both be born again and born from above and that the way that happens is mysterious.

Nicodemus misses the point – he focus only on the again part – “How can someone be born again? Can one enter into his or her mother’s womb a second time?” He tries to reduce something that is filled with mystery to a question about rational possibility.

And the more I think about it, that’s exactly what those speakers at youth retreats wanted us to do. To make faith about believing the right thing. To prove that it’s true. To be on the right side of the binary. For them the question, “Are you a Christian or not?” was a straightforward question – either yes or no.

Now, I know that most of you did not grow up in the Bible belt like I did and your experience is likely different than mine. But my guess is that we all have had the experience of reducing the mystery of the journey of faith into a simplistic binary.

Maybe you experienced that in a tradition that emphasized original sin and separated people into simplistic categories of good and bad.

Maybe you still feel guilt because of this.

Or maybe you’ve experienced this in the opposite direction – from those who claim faith, itself, is a primitive act that doesn’t hold up to modern scientific inquiry because they see faith as primarily a set of irrational truth claims.

But regardless of our experiences, I think, far too often, we have been told that the role of faith is to reduce the mystery of God into something explainable (can you enter a womb again?), into

something observable (Jesus performed miracles), into something that we can fully and completely grasp...into a concrete answer that we can give for our faith. Or to reduce it to something that is so out of touch with modern thinking that we give up on it altogether.

And when our faith is based on these types of simplistic binary choices, it will lead to one of two outcomes – it will cause us to reject our faith altogether once it is challenged or it will cause us to simply choose to reject and often demonize any evidence that threatens our ability to have absolute certainty.

Thank God, then, for the invitation Jesus offers Nicodemus and by extension us. He goes on to tell him, “The wind blows where it chooses and you hear its sound but don’t know where it’s going. The same is true of those born of the Spirit.” In other words, it’s like Jesus is saying, you can no more limit who God is to a set of pat answers than you can control which way the wind blows.

You see, the enemy of faith is not doubt. The enemy of faith is certainty. We can either be certain that God doesn’t exist or we can be certain that our understanding of God is right and neither of these leave room for us to be born of the Spirit. Neither of these leave room for God’s spirit to blow us this way and that way. To be certain means that we have already made up our minds about our ideas about God.

Jesus offers Nicodemus and offers us freedom from certainty. In fact, it is only by letting go of being able to fully explain Jesus, of having some proof that affirms our faith with certainty, that we can actually see that God offers us. You see, God did not give us a list of right answers to check off:

Trinity – check
Virgin birth – check
Born again – check

Instead, God gave us God’s own Son. God didn’t offer us certainty. God offers us relationship. “God so loved the world that God gave God’s only son so that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life.” Believing in Jesus is about being born again and being born from above....AND it’s about being comfortable with the mystery that we can’t really explain what any of that fully means. Faith is more like a marriage than a game of Jeopardy.

In Jeopardy – you either get the answer right or you get it wrong. Every question has one right answer and anything other than that one right answer is wrong. But when I got married, I became and am becoming a new person – not because I have some secret knowledge that I didn’t have before – but because my life is no longer lived in isolation; it’s now lived in intimate partnership with another person. My life is new because the relationship has changed it.

That’s the gift that God offers us in Jesus. Not to be able to ace the theological game of Jeopardy. But to enter into a relationship that gives us new life, that embraces mystery and

even doubt, that not only frees us but invites us to give up having all the answers and to simply be open to moving in whatever direction the spirit leads us. That is the gift Jesus offered Nicodemus and that is the gift he offers us wherever we find ourselves on life's journey.