

Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17

Friends, there is nothing more improbably comedic than two men having a conversation about childbirth.

It's like, these two experts get together, and here is what happens: one man going to another man and saying, the kingdom of God is like being born.

And Nicodemus says, should I as a grown man crawl back inside my mother's womb and be born again.

No.

Instead, I just want to hand these two a cigar and tell them to wait in the waiting room, because they are not being particularly helpful in this birthing experience.

And there's a reason that it's not all obvious at first. What Jesus is describing is truly a mystery of faith. What is the kingdom of heaven? And how can we as a people enter into the kingdom?

Mysteries of the faith are hard to understand. It's why we move to symbol to try and understand our faith, all the time.

For instance, it is our custom to place hands on the newly baptized, if they're a baby, we hold them, if they're older, we touch their heads, and we pray for the Holy Spirit. Why do we do this?

We do not know how to bless as God blesses, as the Holy Spirit blesses, by giving a covenant or drawing down to an altar or putting tongues of fire on people. We are not God. So we bless each other as well as we can, by our hands, and ask that the Holy Spirit does the rest. And she always does.

I kind of wonder what it might have been like if Jesus and Nicodemus tried a different tactic in their conversation. Nicodemus is tripping over himself to know everything at once. He's a Pharisee, a religious leader, so he knows his scripture and he knows what he's expecting and then Jesus really surprises him with these comments about birth and about flesh and the spirit. He's invited into the mystery.

A few weeks ago, I got to sit in with middle school Sunday school, which if you don't know, is like the place to be. I got interviewed by Bart, who was pretending to be Ellen, and he has an excellent impression of Ellen. So it was the real deal. He asked what it was like when I was younger, what adults in my life shared their faith with me.

And this is what I told him and our middle schoolers: when I was young, I was best friends with Debbie and Becca Weiser, and their family was Jewish. I was invited over to the Weisers' house to share in their Passover dinner. And we had the questions, and we tasted this bitter parsley and saltwater, the tears of the people who had been enslaved and then sent into the desert, and we searched all over the house for hidden h. It was this experience of learning the mysteries of someone else's faith through a shared meal, and through actually experiencing them, that I came to know a little bit about Judaism.

I like that approach. And it's because of this early faith education that I came to have a lifelong dialogue with my Jewish friends, to have a deep empathy for their experience of faith. That's why, too, when I heard last week that Jewish Community Centers, which are community activity spaces and not worship spaces, around the country were getting terrible death threats, I was disheartened and angry right alongside my Jewish friends. Our own JCC on Mercer Island was evacuated right in the middle of evening programming with youth and families there.

And I was even more heartbroken when I heard that Capitol Hill's Temple de Hirsch Sinai was spray painted with anti-Semitic hate speech this week. The Temple is worship space, just like Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church. Temple de Hirsch Sinai is where Rabbi Daniel Weiner leads, and he is a friend to this congregation, he's planning to help us lead worship at our Easter Vigil in a few weeks. Here is what he said: "It was immensely troubling and immensely disturbing and shocking to me and to our community." He also said that the hate speech didn't surprise him. It didn't surprise him, because hate speech of all kinds is on the rise, and because there has been a particular uptick in Anti-Semitism.

I'm disheartened, because anti-Semitic hate speech is one of the unfortunate shadows that Christianity has cast. Along with all the great things about the Lutheran reformation we are celebrating this year, we also have to continuously acknowledge that the Reformation was deeply Anti-Semitic. It's something that we are inheritors of, and it's something we can no longer pretend is in our past or in the world's past. Because it's happening still today. We have to take responsibility for that part of our heritage and speak and work against Anti-Semitism in every form. Because Jewish people are not

only our siblings from the family of Abraham, that we have been grafted into, but they are the reason that we have been given the branch of peace and reconciled to God.

And so when I see Jesus and Nicodemus sitting in a courtyard and talking it over and trying to figure out the mysteries of faith together, even where there is misunderstanding, I see that as our potential model.

Nicodemus becomes an advocate for Jesus. He asks for a fair trial for him, and later, he helps Joseph of Arimathea dress Jesus' body with aloe and spices. This suggests a long and deep friendship -- that this dialogue continued. Not only that the dialogue continued, but that he entered into the mystery with Jesus.

I'm inspired by this. Nicodemus remained Jewish, and was a friend to Jesus.

When I see myself as a young girl sitting at the Weiser's table and learning about the Exodus through the Passover meal, that is our opportunity. To share conversation and to try and build a bridge of understanding between people. It's work that is not done.

And we are called to it, because what Jesus was trying to get at in the mystery of faith is that he came not to condemn the world, but to save us all, and to offer God's reconciliation to all. You may be born of water and Spirit. You can experience change and new life, even now. And you are the ones now who will be reconcilers, through Christ. God is reconciling the whole world to him, all the time. God so loved the world.

Someone made a sign for the Temple to cover up the graffiti. It says "Love Wins." It's a simple but powerful message, an invitation to all of us to share our table, to be in dialogue, and to change into people who will speak love into this world.