

WGUMC March 12, 2017 John 3:1-17  
"Amelia Bedelia on Being Born Again"

[This is the second in a series of sermons engaging with the work of James Fowler, a United Methodist pastor Professor of Theology and Human Development at Emory University. He also was the Director of the Center for Research on Faith and Moral Development and the Center for Ethics at Emory. In 1984, he wrote *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. In this second sermon, I am focusing on the second stage of faith that Fowler calls "Mythic-Literal" Faith for children from 7 to 11 years old.]

Somehow I missed the Amelia Bedelia books when I was a kid, and I couldn't find the original series at the library.

Fortunately, I was able to listen to it on YouTube.

It starts out with Amelia Bedelia getting a job as a housekeeper. On her first day of work, Mrs. Rogers leaves her with a long list of things to do. First on the list is "Change the towels," so Amelia Bedelia gets some scissors and cuts holes in the towels. That changes them. Next she "dusts" the furniture, but only after finding some dusting powder. Then she is supposed to draw the drapes, so she gets out her sketchpad

and draws the drapes. She also trims the steak with lace and dresses the chicken in lederhosen.

Elementary school kids grow up loving these books because, like Amelia Bedelia, they are very concrete thinkers. Compared to the younger children we talked about last week who tend to live in a fantasy world, children in Grades Two through Five live in a much more concrete world. Instead of mixing fantasy and reality the way Stage One children do, Stage Two children are much better able to sort the real from the make-believe. Not only that, but they are beginning to think logically about problems. Fifth graders are smart, as the game show says, and ten-year-olds are budding scientists. If you present them with a fact, they will ask you for a proof. They also have a very strong sense of justice and believe that the world and even God is bound by basic rules of fairness. James Fowler sums up this mindset with the term *concrete operational thinking*.

In John's Gospel today, Nicodemus is displaying some concrete operational thinking. In many ways, Nicodemus fits Fowler's second stage of faith development, the mythic-literal stage, and as we take a look at the story, I think that you'll see what I mean.

Remember from last week how egocentric and narcissistic the devil in the story of the temptation was? When you are narcissistic, you are so self-centered that you are incapable of seeing the world from anyone else's point of view. That narcissism is typical of Stage One faith development. But as children grow and progress to Stage Two, they are beginning to learn how to see things from another point of view. And I propose that that is the reason Nicodemus decides to come to Jesus, because he wants to understand Jesus' point of view. He wants to know where Jesus is coming from, who Jesus is and what Jesus is about.

Right off the bat, Nicodemus shows us that he is just as smart as a fifth grader, because he engages in a little deductive reasoning. He says to Jesus, "We know that you are a teacher who comes from God; for no one can do these signs you do apart from the presence of God." Here is his logic at work: Only those who come from God can perform miracles. Jesus has done miracles. Therefore, Jesus must be from God. This is an example of concrete operational thinking.

So, Nicodemus is here to test his hypothesis that Jesus has come from God. That's great, but Jesus is not a concrete operational thinker. He is a metaphorical thinker, and so he messes with Nicodemus when he says to him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" or *born again*, for the Greek can mean either. But it doesn't really matter because Nicodemus can't make that metaphorical move and responds, "How can anyone be born

after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Nicodemus is having an Amelia Bedelia moment. He is thinking very concretely and literally here and what Jesus is saying makes no sense to him. That's kind of surprising, given the fact that Nicodemus no doubt believes in many stories that make just about as much sense to us. But this is another feature of Stage Two faith development. Stage Two thinkers love stories, and this is the age at which they learn the stories of their faith tradition. Think Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. It is important to teach Bible stories at this age, because stories help children weave all the different parts of their reality into one narrative whole. Stories help them make sense of their world. And if they don't get their stories from the Bible and their faith tradition, they will surely get them from someplace else.

Nicodemus knew the stories of his faith tradition. He knew the stories about God creating the world in six days and saving the animals on a big boat and making Sarah a mother at the age of 90 and sending a plague of frogs on the Egyptians and parting the Red Sea. He had learned all these stories as a boy and took them at face value.

Stage Two thinkers interpret stories concretely, literally, the way Amelia Bedelia interpreted her To Do list. So when Nicodemus hears Jesus talk about being born again, he gets a very concrete picture in his head. Now he doesn't have trouble with the story about Jonah inside the belly of a whale, after all, it's in the Bible. But he can't quite get his mind around the idea of an old man inside of a uterus! That's preposterous!

Jesus ignores his question and simply goes on, saying:  
"Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be

astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'  
The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it,  
but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So  
it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." In the end, Jesus'  
explanation only adds to Nicodemus' confusion. "How can  
these things be?" is all he can say.

Poor Nicodemus! He is on the cusp of a crisis. Children in  
Stage Two faith development begin to transition to Stage  
Three when the stories that have helped them make sense of  
their world don't make sense anymore. All of a sudden they  
become aware of other stories that conflict with the stories  
they have been told. And to deal with these conflicting stories,  
this clash of narratives, they are going to have to construct a  
new story, a new narrative, one that is big enough and complex  
enough to include all the new truth that they are discovering.

Jesus comes into the world of first century Palestine and  
his coming brings about a clash of narratives. Nicodemus and

his contemporaries already have a story about the Messiah of Israel, the anointed king, who is coming to establish God's kingdom and to rule over it with justice and peace. But Jesus and his followers are telling a different story. They are offering a different narrative, one that says that Jesus is the Messiah.

Most of the religious leaders dismiss that narrative out of hand. But Nicodemus is at least open to investigating it. As a Stage Two thinker, Nicodemus is thinking, "OK, Jesus, where is the proof? Where is the kingdom of God? Where is God's reign of justice and peace? When I look around, I don't see God's reign. All I see is the Roman Army. So, the concrete facts on the ground tell me that the Messiah is not yet here."

And yet Nicodemus comes to Jesus, anyway. Perhaps he does so because, he has a vague feeling that it's time for him to progress to the next stage. Even though he is a teacher of Israel, there are still things he doesn't know and maybe this new teacher can help him understand. But Jesus says that



taking his faith to the next level is going to require a bigger shift in thinking than Nicodemus is prepared for. If he wants to understand Jesus, Nicodemus is going to have to surrender to a Spirit that blows where it chooses and will take him to places he has never been before. That Spirit will make him a new person with a new understanding of God as someone who so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. When Nicodemus gets that it will be as if he was born again into an entirely new world.

Nicodemus is not quite there yet, but he's well on his way. A few chapters later, he dares to defend Jesus when the authorities begin to plot against him. And then he comes back at the end of the Gospel and helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial.

We never hear about him again, but I think the character of Nicodemus is meant to be a stand-in for a lot of us who are

not quite there yet, but are on the way. He certainly stands in for Christians who seem to be stuck in Stage Two, thinking too literally about the stories of our faith. Whether we regard them as historically and factually true or dismiss them as nonsense—either way, we miss what the Spirit is trying to do: bring us to a deeper, richer, more multi-layered and contextual understanding of these stories and to a more God-filled experience of their truth for our lives today.

But I want to end with a note of caution for those of us who are tempted to make fun of Stage Two Christians. Getting back to *Amelia Bedelia*: when Mr. and Mrs. Rogers return and discover what she has done to their home, they are shocked. Mrs. Rogers is angry and is about to fire Amelia, when her husband discovers the lemon meringue pie that Amelia has made for them. He takes one bite and he's on a transport to heaven. In the kitchen there is a place for literal interpretation, and Amelia Bedelia can follow a pie recipe to perfection. So we

are reminded that literal thinkers have their own gifts to give, their own wisdom to offer. Even with their literal interpretations of the Bible, Stage Two Christians can still help us to "taste and see that the Lord is good." [Psalm 34:8]

We should never look down on our fellow Christians, no matter what stage we or they are on. The great German theologian, Karl Barth, had no trouble writing sentences that were hundreds of words long. But when he was asked to summarize his 14 volumes of theology in 25 words or less, he answered, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." In the final analysis, that's all we need to know.