Sunday, February 20, 2005
CERTAINTY AND UNCERTAINTY
John 3:1-17

A young woman asked me, “How can I be sure I’m really in love and that the man I plan to marry is the right one for me? Is there any way I can be completely certain?” A young man asked, “Is there any sure way that I can be certain that I’ve chosen the right vocation?” A student asked, “Did I choose the right college for my education?” Someone else asked me, “How can I be certain that God exists?”

The desire for certitude is universal. It comes from good motivations. You want to base your life on a solid foundation. You want to be certain that your decision is the best one. No one wants to be seen as a fool. Some certainty about life’s questions is necessary because each day you need to make decisions.

However, too much certainty can be dangerous. A young woman who is a member of this church gave me a copy of an essay she had written as part of her application to a major university. The title of the essay is: “The Debate of Certainty.” I was impressed by the essay, and especially its closing statement. She wrote, “One thing of which I am certain: certainty is growth’s greatest inhibitor.” I am convinced Jesus would agree with this statement. So would Nicodemus.

Nicodemus came to see Jesus secretly one night. He came because he had begun to doubt his certainty. He was curious. He had questions to which he sought answers. He was a leader in the Jewish community. He was a seeker of the truth. He had a teachable spirit. It’s an important day in your life when you are not afraid to ask good questions; when you are not afraid to explore some of your long-held assumptions. That’s what was so exciting about the seminar we sponsored last weekend which featured the authors of the book If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person. Its purpose was not to say, “This is what you must believe.” Its purpose was to ask, “Are we fully understanding the grace of God?”

Nicodemus wanted to deepen his spiritual life. He wanted to discover more of what could be missing. He recognized a new void deep in his soul that was not being filled by the old patterns and beliefs that used to work. If, like Nicodemus, you are teachable, you will not be afraid of seeking new insights, new revelations, and new experiences.

So he came to Jesus one night and said (and now I’m paraphrasing), “I’m convinced that you are a ‘spirit person.’ You have an intimate relationship with the Divine. What do I need to do to fill the spiritual void in my soul? How can I be more aware of and experience the kind of relationship with God that you have?”

The answer Jesus gave him is one with which you are familiar: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Earlier translations say, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” In other words, no one can come into a more intimate relationship with God unless you are willing to give up some of your old ideas about God. You have to be willing to examine some of your traditional certainties. You need to be open to receiving new truth. That’s what it means to be born from above.

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Jesus only used the term “born from above” or “born again” this one time, and that was in his meeting with Nicodemus. However, there are

other stories in the gospels where Jesus met all kinds of individuals who, like Nicodemus, were searching for new meaning and purpose in their lives — people who wanted a more intimate relationship with God. Yet with these individuals, he did not use the phrase “born from above” or “born again” as the way to accomplish that goal. They needed different advice.

To some of the seekers who came to him with the same kind of question as Nicodemus, he said simply, “Follow me.” To another person, he said, “If you want God to work powerfully in your life, sell all you have and give the money to the poor and come follow me.” That man did not take the advice Jesus gave.

To yet another individual seeking spiritual depth and direction, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan and said, “Go and love other people and be a neighbor to them in the same way as the Samaritan loved and helped the injured Jew by the side of the road.” In other words, love not only your friends and those like you — love also your enemies and those who despise you. You cannot love God and be in a closer relationship with God without loving others, even your enemies.

You hear many people today focus on being “born again” followers of Jesus, but not very many who claim to be “sell all you have and give to the poor” followers of Jesus, or even “love your enemies by coming to their aid” followers of Jesus.

As far as is known, Jesus never used the term “born again” or “born from above” with his twelve disciples, and they never used it in their own teaching and preaching after the resurrection. The Apostle Paul was not familiar with the phrase. I mention this to underscore the fact that being “born again” is one metaphor among many that have been used to describe coming into a new relationship with the Divine.

What is there in the story of Nicodemus and his encounter with Jesus that will help you on your own spiritual journey? What are some of the ways in which Nicodemus represents you and your continuing spiritual quest?

First of all, remember he was a solid, respectable individual who was certain that he had a good, strong ethical foundation. But like most of you, he also had a desire now and then for a more meaningful spiritual connection.

Let’s talk about this issue openly and honestly. There are many intelligent, charming, decent people who most of the time feel no need for deepening their faith and commitment to God. They believe “God helps those who help themselves.” A deepened religious faith, they are certain, is for the weak or the morally degraded.

They regard religious faith as a kind of ambulance that will hopefully be ready if and when they need it. The church is like an emergency room and hospital. They want it to be there and to be the very best if and when they need it. Jesus is something like a physician on call. In the meantime, they can take care of themselves.

Such people are by no means anti-religious. They consider the ambulance service a good thing. They want the best emergency service and physician to always be available. They are willing to financially support the upkeep of the emergency service and the hospital and honor it with their presence on certain occasions.

Even within the church, you can find people like Nicodemus. Here, he represents what is sometimes known as the “in-group.” It includes those who have inherited the Christian faith and have never had a reason to doubt it. Yet at times, like Nicodemus, they sense within their lives a spiritual vacuum — something is missing. Their certainty begins to turn into uncertainty. When that happens to you, that can be good news. Now you are ready to be born from above. You are ready for a deeper relationship with the Divine.

Many people, and that includes some of you, are also like Nicodemus in the way they approach Jesus. He came to Jesus secretly. He didn’t want others to know that his certainty was turning into uncertainty. So he began the conversation in a tentative way. He didn’t want to appear too eager. In his opening statement, he used the editorial “we” instead of “I.” “We know you are a teacher who has come from God.” He was trying to be careful lest he become too personally involved and have his life changed. This was in contrast to others who approached Jesus with their spiritual needs openly and without hesitation. Sick people tried to touch him. Others in the crowds shouted for his attention in an attempt to get help.

Some friends brought their sick friend on a stretcher, and in order to get to Jesus, they had to go up on the roof and take it apart so they could let down their sick friend into the room where he was.

During the time of slavery in this country, slaves were not allowed to have their own worship services and had to learn to read and write in secret. So they held clandestine religious gatherings at night, a practice that continued after emancipation. They saw in Nicodemus’ night visit proof that it was possible to come to Jesus even when those in power were against it.

Nicodemus’ visit was exploratory, and in this story, he did not completely understand the invitation extended to him. Many of the slaves, by contrast, understood and even embraced what God had to offer them through the ministry of Jesus.

There’s one more way in which many people today are like Nicodemus, and maybe you are included. He was not exactly sure what he was searching for. The story does not tell you specifically why he came. All that you can do is make some educated guesses based on the answers he received from Jesus. You can be sure that he was beginning to doubt his certainty.

Many people today know they have a problem, but they are not able to clearly communicate or focus specifically on the problem. They know something is wrong or missing in their lives, and they need help in uncovering what it is and help in dealing with it.

Many people come to worship services because they sense something is missing in their lives but are not sure what it is. They know there is a deeper spiritual side to life but aren’t sure how to find it. They intuitively know there has to be more to life than accumulating more and more stuff.

What was Nicodemus searching for? Maybe he heard Jesus teach and was persuaded that he had a magnetic spiritual quality and wanted something like that for himself.

There was no question that Jesus possessed something unique, a quality of life for which Nicodemus, despite all his wealth and social prominence, had passionately sought but which he had never been able to discover in his own religious search. Following all the rules to the letter of the law had not brought him the inner peace and outward joy he so much wanted.

The Bible does not tell you the outcome of the meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus. Whether or not one day he took the risk of uncertainty and was “born from above” is not known.

But what about you? Do not be afraid to let go of some of your certitude so that you can be open to new ways of God’s spirit working in your life. In the words of Jesus, “Do not be afraid to be born from above,” which means being open to new truth. Do not be afraid of being transformed.

Here are some signs to look for in your life to help you determine whether or not that transformation is taking place:

If you are being born from above, you will not be afraid of uncertainty.

If you are being born from above, you will have frequent and overwhelming moments of appreciation and gratitude.

If you are being born from above, you will find yourself losing the ability to worry.

If you are being born from above, you will have contented moments of connectedness with others and nature.

If you are being born from above, you will have an increased ability to receive love extended by others.

If you are being born from above, you will have frequent attacks of smiling. Amen.