

While this may not come as a surprise to many of you, and certainly not to the youth, I am a geek. I'm not an obsessive one, but a geek all the same. I've played role-playing games since second grade, back when Dungeon and Dragons first hit the market, and I have entire bookshelves at home designated for different game systems. I know that Wednesday is new comic book day, and still hit Graham Cracker's comics for my weekly superhero fix. I love to read fantasy and horror novels and often look at buildings with a critical eye, trying to decide if they could withstand a zombie attack. I own all the seasons of Buffy the Vampire Slayer on DVD, and had seen the new Star Trek movie three times by the end of its opening weekend. By any classification of the word, I am a geek. And fairly proud of it. I revel in my geekdom.

But I didn't always. My early years of High School were rough, socially. I mean I had my circle of friends and I was well liked, but as a fantasy nut who sang and danced in the show choir and did the theater productions at a sports obsessed school like Naperville North, my social status was definitely down near the bottom of the food chain.

Then, at the beginning of my Junior year, my father took a new job, and the family moved out to a very small suburb of Boston. The whole high school was

only 800 people, and the sports teams took everyone who showed up. Playing football wasn't a big deal at this school...but the show choir...Well, that was a different story. The Show Choir was one of the best on the East Coast, if not the country. They traveled all over, and won every competition. Being in the show choir at this school was a status symbol. Add to this that I was new. Everyone there had lived there all their lives and knew each other since kindergarten, and here I was, a curiosity with a strange accent. I suddenly realized that I had gone from the bottom of the social ladder to the top, and hadn't needed to change a single thing about myself. I realized that I didn't need to hide who I was, or worry what other people thought, because in the end, none of it mattered.

Before our reading today, Jesus has just finished clearing the moneychangers from the temple with a whip; an act sure to attract attention and controversy. He performed miracles in Jerusalem and flouted the leaders of the Jewish community. Then our reading begins. And we have one of the Pharisees coming to Jesus, and saying, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." A Pharisee coming to Jesus, not to try and stump him or trick him on a question of theology, but to acknowledge him as one sent by God. This would not have made Nicodemus very popular with the other Pharisees. Which probably explains why he showed up so late.

You see, Nicodemus didn't come and talk to Jesus in front of the crowds, or sit down with him and his disciples to dinner. No, it says that he came to him by night. Now, it could be that Nicodemus was simply thinking over what he had seen and heard that day, and decided to go talk to Jesus regardless of the late hour, but I don't think that is the case. I think Nicodemus waited until after dark to go see Jesus, because after dark, there was little chance of anyone he knew seeing him talk to Jesus. I think that Nicodemus believed in Jesus, but that he was afraid of what might happen if he was seen talking with him. Perhaps he would be shunned by the other Pharisees. Perhaps he would lose his position as one of the leaders of the church. Perhaps he would even be in danger when Jesus and his followers were finally rounded up! Many possible fears. Many possible reasons for Nicodemus to wait and seek Jesus out after dark.

It is easy to relate to Nicodemus, isn't it? A guy who worries about what people will think of him if his true thoughts were known. A person who worries about what people will think of him, and how it might affect his work, his status in the community, and his life. How often have we agreed with a person or a group because we didn't want them to think badly of us? How often have we kept our mouths shut rather than start an argument that might draw too much attention. How often have we never brought up a subject at all because we worry that others might not agree with us on the issue.

And this is what I want to talk about today. How many of us are keeping our faith, our belief, our Christianity in the dark? Week after week we come to church, to worship, but how many of us discuss our religion with our neighbors or co-workers? Evangelism has gotten to be a dirty work in the church. A lot of people freeze up at the very mention of the E-word. Why is that? What is it about this word, this concept that makes us cringe?

I think for some of us, when we hear the word Evangelize, we get this image of people going door to door with their Bibles, or the televangelists on TV with fire in their eyes striding about the stage telling people what they need to do to be saved. The idea of doing that sort of thing makes us uncomfortable. Even the idea of being associated with those kind of people makes us uncomfortable, doesn't it. And so, like Nicodemus, we wait till after dark. We wait until we know we are with people who believe like we do before we talk about God or faith.

But Evangelism can be so much more than that. Or less, depending on how you want to look at it. Evangelism is about sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but that doesn't mean you have to sit down with your Bible and read it to your neighbor the next time they stop by to borrow a cup of sugar. In fact, that would be kind of weird, wouldn't it? No, evangelism can start with something as small as asking someone what church they go to, or talking about some of the amazing, wonderful things happening within this congregation...or even just some of the

silly goofy things going on at this church. Any conversation that takes the fact that you are a Christian out of the darkness and brings it into the light can be an opening for evangelism.

An old friend from college is working at a Unitarian Universalist church, and she asked me to come and talk to the youth about Christianity. She sent me their questions in advance, and I realized what a distorted view of Christianity these students had. In talking with her and the youth, I realized that while some of their negative opinion of Christianity was stemming from personal experience, most was coming from the way Christians are portrayed in the media.

How often, especially during election years, do we hear "Christians" in the news spewing a message of hate, exclusion, or ignorance? As with any group, there are those on the fringe, so far to the right or the left that they become fanatical in their particular issue and sure that God will smite those who don't agree with them. Ninety percent of Christians don't agree with them, but they are loud and aggressive, and belligerent, and unfortunately they make for good television. The Christian who quietly works the 3 AM shift at the homeless shelter just doesn't bring in the ratings like the report on the one who bombed an abortion clinic.

Is it any wonder then, that Christianity has such a low reputation around the world if this is the only view they see?

We enter into a Catch-22 situation, don't we? Because we don't want to be associated with the fanatics or the fringe; because we don't want to be associated with the stigmata of being labeled one of those Christians, like Nicodemus, we become afraid to profess what we believe by the light of day. And yet, because we do not speak up, the fringe groups are the only voices that people hear.

There is a quote attributed to Edmund Burke that says, " All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." And this is exactly what happens when we sit back, keep our mouths shut, and do nothing. It is time we stopped worrying about what others might think, or how we might be judged, and time to start talking about who we are!

We have all heard the igniting ministries slogan for the United Methodist Church, Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors. There is a new movement in the United Methodist Church called Re-Think church, where we are called to think of this slogan in a new way. What if, instead of adjectives those statements were verbs? What if we pledged ourselves to OPEN hearts, OPEN minds, and OPEN doors?

We need to let go of our fears and not let our faith be contained within this building. We need to let go of our fears and feel the power of the Holy Spirit at work in this church. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world - shining like a city

on a hill that cannot be hid. Don't hide your light under a basket, but let it shine for all to see!"

There are so many things happening in this church, so much that you can talk about with your friends, neighbors and co-workers. You can tell them about the refugee ministry, or the work at Lazarus house, or ask for donations for the Northern Illinois Food Bank. You can invite them to come with you for pancakes to Liberty Fest, or just to hang out and play games at the Parish Life event on the 20th. You can ask if they want to go to the Farmer's Market one Friday then give them a tour of your church. Or you can bring them a slice of a pie that you bought from the United Methodist Women on the 21st.

There are many people in the world that see Christianity as a religion fueled by hate or by intolerance. A religion that is exclusive and divisive. More worried about forcing everyone to believe as we do than about spreading a message of love and acceptance. Which brings us back to today's reading, and to one of the most well known verses in the Bible; what some claim is the entire point of the Gospels, "For 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."

There are so many ways that you can start a conversation. So many simple ways that you can let people know that you are a Christian, and from there, what it means to be a Christian. So many ways that you can move out of the darkness. For like the city Jesus spoke of, this church is built on a hill and has far too much going on for us to hide it for ourselves. May you let the light of God's Holy Spirit shine through you and illuminate the world to what it truly means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Amen.