

Second Sunday in Lent/March 12, 2017
Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 122; John 3:1-17;
Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"Dismantling Barriers"

I love this character of Nicodemus. And we only find him in John's gospel. We have him here, meeting Jesus in the dark of night, we see him again when Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin for trial, and we find him again, helping Joseph of Arimathea with the corpse of Jesus after the crucifixion. He seems a likeable enough character, like a favorite old uncle. He is inclined and curious toward knowledge of the truth Jesus has to offer, yet, he is a Pharisee, and thus portrayed by John as are other Jewish religious leaders, as one who is in the dark, who does not know the truth Jesus possesses, who clings to the past and seemingly is unwilling or unable to go the new way that Jesus teaches and would call him to. Namely, to be "*born from above*."

Now the phrase, "*born from above*" or "*born anew*" or "*born again*" is an interesting one for us. First of all, the Greek word used here is not definitive. It can mean each of those things, *born from above, born anew, or born again*. It is a phrase that has taken on particular meaning for some of us, especially when put as the question, "*Are you born again?*" At our House Church meeting last Wednesday, we talked about this. There is definitely some discomfort for many with this phrase. It carries some baggage for many of us.

Traditionally the Church understood these words as referring to baptism and the experience of the Spirit, as Jesus later says "*no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit*." And we would see in the book of Acts, an emphasis on whether or not the Spirit is present in the act of baptism (Acts 8:14-24). And remember, the basic teaching of both John the Baptist and Jesus, was *repentance and being baptized for the forgiveness of sins*, and a turning of one's life. The Greek word *metanoia*, often used to describe this process, means literally, to move "*beyond the mind*", a transformation of the mind or heart, a conversion of one's way of life, one's whole way of seeing the world and the reality in which we live.

John Wesley, the great Methodist reformer, used the phrase "born again" and taught that new birth was necessary for salvation, as it showed one's movement toward holiness. And preachers of the 18th century revival meetings in America, used the phrase to speak of the change the Spirit would bring into a person's life. In the 19th century, the new birth experience was understood as something which took place *before* baptism, it was a requirement for baptism, and became part of the theology of the modern Evangelical movement. In the 1960s being "*born again*" meant that you had had a personal experience of Christ, often, a particular, identifiable moment in time, when you experienced the presence of the Spirit, often a physical experience, and made a conscious decision to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, which then led you to make changes in the way you lived. You were thus "Saved", from Hell and promised a place in Heaven. For many, these changes were radical, transforming lives of addiction or crime, to lives based on religious teachings and practice.

But for some of us, especially those who may have grown up in mainline Protestant or Catholic traditions, the question, "*Are you born again?*" did not always come across as a loving, Christian, concern, but rather as a voice of judgment. And indeed, it was a way of suggesting by some within parts of the Evangelical, Charismatic or Pentecostal movements, the idea that some, those that were "born again" had the real faith in Jesus, the true faith, that their's was a real

experience and relationship with the living Christ. Whereas others were merely nominal Christians, that their faith was lacking, and that unless they became "born again" they were doomed to lives of sin and corruption and to the fires of Hell after death.

One of our House Church members shared how an experience at a Billy Graham crusade, especially the altar call at the end, seemed a bit strange and uncomfortable. My experience as a teenager in a United Methodist youth group, attending a Christian music concert at a local Evangelical church, was similar. Upon hearing the call to come forward and make our commitment to Jesus Christ, a number of us asked ourselves, *I thought I already was committed to Jesus Christ?* Those kinds of experiences may have turned some of us off, and may have felt judgmental, but they also could have opened doors to deeper thinking and contemplation about the possibilities of our Christian faith, in some cases making a real difference in our lives.

Richard Rohr, in his book that some of us are studying, Everything Belongs, The Gift of Contemplative Prayer, talks about the need for "liminal" or "threshold" spaces, experiences that enlighten us or take us to a new level of thinking or being, that can lead to transformation. But he cautions, *"When we first have a liminal experience, it's very inflating. People are often a bit obnoxious after their "born again" experience, their baptism in the Spirit, or their first religious retreat - at least for a few days. You can't blame them. It's so exciting to finally see the truth. But if they don't have humility and honesty at that point, it's really dangerous. They use the language of descent for an ascent. Unfortunately, it is rather common today among all groups, especially if people have wasted many years on "drugs, sex and rock and roll." God becomes a way for the humiliated ego to re-ascend. The last experience of God is frequently the **greatest obstacle** to the next experience of God. We make an absolute out of it and use it to strengthen our ego, to self-aggrandize and self-congratulate. Then, of course, nothing more happens. That's why Jesus repeats the admonition to conversion. We need to be converted again and again. We aren't born again. We are born again and again and again. Accepting and acting upon that principle takes a lot of letting go. If we aren't willing to move out of our comfort zone, it won't happen. All great spirituality is about letting go."* (Everything Belongs, pgs.52-53).

So, if Richard Rohr, and many others who share his thinking, are correct, then the way of Christ that we are called to live, is about opening ourselves up, it's about letting go, about removing the obstacles that keep us from opening those doorways to the presence of the Spirit. The Christian way of life is not one of stagnancy, not a sedentary venture, where we believe we can attain a point of ultimate knowledge or truth. The Christian life is not a goal to be accomplished or a point to which we strive and then stop all striving.

When I went off to seminary, the people at my church warned me, *"Don't let them change you!"* But seminary did change me. And I needed to be changed. I went there with basically a Sunday School knowledge of scripture and faith and had to learn about things like literary, source and form criticism, historical exegesis, demythologizing, and whole new ways of looking at the Bible. It was hard work! And not just because it required rigorous study and research. It was also emotionally draining because my whole way of seeing things was being turned on its head. I had to let go of many of my preconceived ideas, had to move the obstacles which kept me from being open to new approaches to understanding scripture and God. And in the process, my faith wasn't destroyed, it was deepened and enriched.

The way of Christ to which we are called is a journey. It is a path that leads from insight to insight, from life to death to life and death and life again, and again and again. It is ever changing, yet held within the constancy of God, of love, of life, of hope, of joy, of constant creativity, and an ever evolving reality where nothing is lost, but all things are ever transforming.

Nicodemus had a difficult time understanding what Jesus was trying to tell him. He symbolizes the iconic person who is stuck in a way of thinking, a way of living, that is not open to change or to growth. Even though he seems a bit harsh with him, I don't think Jesus disliked Nicodemus. And I don't think John includes him in this story to simply be the target of judgment or an example of what is bad or ignorant or wrong. Rather I think Jesus saw his desire to learn, to grow and be stretched, and thus loved him, loved him in such a way that he really wanted to help him experience that newness of life known in what he called the kingdom of God.

Finally, I have to come back to the end of this passage that we heard from John. We have those very familiar words, known by so many, and often referred to with signs held up at sporting events and other public gatherings, that read "John 3:16." Those words that remind us that our faith is based on the love of God. *"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."* These words express our belief that ours is a God of love, and that God desires for us life, and life that is full and abundant and filled with the things that bring us closer to God. Unfortunately, those words have also been used judgmentally, to say that if you don't *believe* like I *believe*, then you are not saved and God doesn't love you. This is truly unfortunate and ironic as well, since the very next verse, the one that is often forgotten but needs to be remembered, John 3:17 says, *"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."*

In a time when the world seems full of judgment and division, when we see one group lined up against another, when we struggle with knowing who is right and who is wrong, what is true and what is false, what we should think and what we should do, we can rest in the assurance that God is calling us, calling us to something new, to a new birth, each of us individually, as well as all of us together, the church, the whole world. We just need to clear the way, to open the doors, to get rid of the obstacles that keep us from getting to that place to which God is calling us. That place where we will know that love of God, that love that desires none to perish but that all may know eternal and abundant life. This Lenten season, may we live within and be transformed by this love. Amen.