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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Second Sunday in Lent (Series A)

March 12, 2017

Text: John 3:1–17¹

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In the NT, people approached Jesus for all kinds of different reasons. Some came out of sheer desperation; He was their only help as they faced demon possession, diseases with no cures or sins and shameful deeds that their consciences and their society could not forgive, etc. Others came to test Jesus to see if they could best Him in public debate over the intricacies of the OT and the traditions of the Jewish fathers.

And then there were some who came for reasons unknown to us. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews is one such person. He came to Jesus at night (vs. 2). Was He afraid to be seen with Jesus in open daylight? Unknown. Did He just want to have a cozy, polite conversation about theology after a day's work? Maybe.

Jesus sees past whatever reason Nicodemus had for coming to Him at night. Our Lord cuts to the heart of the matter. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (vs. 3). Take note here that Jesus attaches special significance to this particular teaching by beginning with “truly, truly”, literally, “amen, amen.” We expect amens to come at the end, such as the end of prayers, hymns, sermons, etc. But Jesus begins with His double amen. In other words, “Pay attention to what I’m about to say; it’s important so don’t miss it!”

Amen, amen, unless you are born again you cannot enter God’s kingdom. Your first birth won’t get you to heaven. Now that’s a very curious thing to say to a Jewish man, that is, one who took his natural, family lineage very seriously. Did not God promise Abraham that He (i.e., God) would make of him (Abraham) a great nation through whom all the world would be blessed (Gen. 12)? To Abraham’s natural descendants was given the covenants and the promises. Why would Nicodemus, a natural descendant of Abraham and a strict follower of God’s Law, need to be born again? Surely his first birth to a Jewish mother as well as his strict adherence to the OT Law and traditions of the Jewish fathers would be enough.

¹ This sermon is prepared with hearty thanks for my forefather in the faith: C.F.W. Walther.

This is, at least in part, why Nicodemus is so confused. Must he be born again from his mother's womb? "With all his knowledge, virtues, and works, and with all his holiness, righteousness, worthiness, piety, and experiences" (C.F.W. Walther, *Gospel Sermons* v.2, p. 6), Nicodemus could not enter God's kingdom. Everything Nicodemus knew and believed told him that he was an elect child of God because he was a son of Abraham through his natural birth from his Jewish mother. But Jesus says it's not enough.

Jesus makes it even more clear in vs. 5 that the natural birth of a Jewish man and all the good works he can do are insufficient to enter God's kingdom, "Truly, truly, (Did you catch that double amen again?) I say to you, unless one is born of water and Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Being "born again" (vs. 3) and being "born of water and Spirit" (vs. 5) are the same things; they are equivalent. That is what Nicodemus and every human being that seeks God's kingdom must have, a new birth. Or all is lost!!!

But wait...Jesus gives even more clarification in vs. 6, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Nicodemus' first birth from his Jewish mother was a good fleshly birth. But to enter and see God's kingdom requires birth of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. So the phrases being "born again" (vs. 3) and being "born of water and Spirit" (vs. 5) and being "born of the Spirit" (vs. 6) all refer to the same thing. Just in case we missed it...Jesus mentions the necessity of being born of the Spirit again in vs. 8.

So what do all these equivalent phrases mean? They "really include nothing else than the new life of true faith" (C.F.W. Walther, *Gospel Sermons* v.2, p. 7) in the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith is what Jesus is teaching Nicodemus. Our Lord makes this abundantly clear in vs. 14–15, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." We Christians believe – have faith – "in Him who was lifted up for us on the cross" (C.F.W. Walther, *Gospel Sermons* v.2, p. 7).

This faith received in the new birth of baptismal water and the Spirit is the most precious and wonderful gift God desires to give to His people regardless of their lineage, their past history, their sins and failures, and so forth. This saving faith in Jesus is "living, powerful, active, and continually working, something which changes and renews our hearts and minds, something which makes us completely new people in intellect, mind, and all our powers" (C.F.W. Walther, *Gospel Sermons* v.2, p. 7).

Our desire to be witnesses for Jesus, to evangelize our family and friends with Christ's Gospel, to preach God the Father's love and grace to all creation is motivated solely by a God-given desire that they all would be born again through water and Spirit unto eternal life.

This is why the language of being "born again" is so appropriate. Our first, natural birth gave us what we know about ourselves: our body and soul, eyes, ears, all our members, our reason and all our senses. (*Small Catechism*; By the way, our first birth is also a gift of God's grace and love! Our first birth simply won't get us into heaven.) Our second birth gives us saving knowledge of Jesus. Once we belonged to the kingdom of Satan. Now we belong to God the Father's kingdom. Once we were condemned sinners. Now we are beloved saints and children of God, heirs of an unfading inheritance. Through faith and second birth we belong to Jesus and "live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness" (*Small Catechism*). We cannot possibly extol sufficiently or exaggerate too egregiously the virtue and wonder of God's love and gift of second birth given to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

The next verses of Scripture are proof positive of God's amazing love given to us in the crucified and resurrected Jesus, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (vs. 16–17).

This saving, loving work of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit comes to us in a very concrete way. The New Testament inseparably links the saving work of the Holy Spirit to Christian baptism. The apostle Peter, in his first epistle, is so bold as to state that "Baptism now saves you" (I Peter 3:21). And Paul calls baptism a washing of regeneration in Titus 3:5. In the New Testament, you will never find an example of a Christian who has not been baptized. Such a person doesn't exist. You must be born again of the water and the Spirit. And God the Holy Trinity desires to perform this gracious work of new creation on every human being.

Blessed are you who have experienced this! But it is also vital that we walk and live in the grace of our new birth, building up our most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit (Jude 20). The Lenten season especially reminds us that we ought always "examine ourselves whether we be in the faith that cleanses our heart and whether we bring the fruits of the Spirit that always follows faith (C.F.W. Walther, *Gospel*

Sermons v.2, p. 10). Heed carefully the Apostle Peter's admonition to live continually in the grace and virtue of our new birth (II Peter 1:5–10):

⁵For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. ¹⁰Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. ¹¹For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear saints of God, you are born again of water and the Holy Spirit unto eternal life. Live and grow in that heaven-sent life so that you will never fall. Rejoice in God's love knowing that your entrance into the eternal kingdom is secure in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.