

Holy Trinity Sunday – Year B
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
John 3:1-17
Pastor Paul Horn

June 7, 2009

“You must be born again!”

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³ In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. ^a”

⁴ “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit ^b gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You ^c must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ^d ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ^e

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, ^f that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

This past week 9 people attended the Wednesday evening Bible Information Class, a larger number in recent past. That does not include the three separate classes that were taught to other individuals during the week. I love teaching this class. Members and friends of our congregation come with wonderful questions. Sometimes they lay their hearts on the table with tears in their eyes. Others challenge with truths they’ve struggled with for some time. Others bring questions that are influenced by the sinful world and their human reason. I think that folks who attend these classes are seeking something, perhaps more knowledge, a stronger faith, a chance to build up their defense of

Scripture... but I pray that they come seeking the truth from God's Word. That's exactly what we see in story today with Nicodemus.

The gospel writer tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a Jewish religious party. They had blinded themselves to believe that they could satisfy the demands of God in his law and so they were very self-righteous people. This particular Pharisee came to Jesus at night. *Why at night?* Perhaps he was afraid. The other Pharisees did not believe Jesus' teaching and were opposed to this young rabbi. However, in his opening statement Nicodemus acknowledges that the Pharisees believed that Jesus was a teacher from God and that God was with him, as evidenced by his miracles. But notice that Nicodemus doesn't confess that Jesus is God.

Like so many other Jews, especially the crowds that mobbed Jesus, Nicodemus had a spectator faith. He was amazed by the miracles, delighted by the teachings, but that's as far as it went. He didn't really believe Jesus was the Savior from sin. However, Nicodemus was unlike so many. He actually sought out the truth.

Did you catch what was missing in Jesus' reply? He didn't really address the Pharisee's statements. He redirects the Pharisee to what was most important, what Nicodemus needed to hear, because... he believed he was saved by good things he did.

Jesus says in vs3, **"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."** That's a loaded baked potato. There's a lot in there to digest. First of all, Jesus points Nicodemus to **the kingdom of God**. The kingdom of God: that's where God's grace rules, in the believer's heart, in heaven itself... wherever the heirs of the kingdom enjoy the blessings of God's kingdom. Secondly, Jesus points Nicodemus how to get to the kingdom of God. **"Unless one is born again,"** literally, "Unless one is born from above." Unless you are born anew spiritually, you cannot see the kingdom of God, you cannot understand it, or receive its blessings and comforts.

Nicodemus replies, **"How can a man be born when he is old. Surly he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"** Nicodemus was smarter than that. He knew Jesus wasn't talking about a physical pregnancy and delivery. Nicodemus was asking, "How does such a spiritual rebirth take place? Is it as likely as an old man like me being born again by my mother?" What Jesus would tell him next would be a smashing blow to Nicodemus's pride.

"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." No one, not even you, Nicodemus, with all you have done as a pious Pharisee, can save you. Everything depends upon the working of the Holy Spirit through water. Jesus was talking about a spiritual rebirth through Holy Baptism (Titus 3:5; Eph 5:26; Mt 19:24; Mk 9:47) This concept was not unfamiliar to Nicodemus. John the Baptist had been preaching a baptism of repentance for some time now, and all the Pharisees knew about John. But rebirth through baptism was a teaching that rocked Nicodemus' world. Jesus was teaching that rebirth was not something a person brings about himself, but something he experiences, something that happens to him, just as a

natural, physical conception and birth is not something the person being born accomplishes and can claim credit for.

Jesus said to him, **“You must be born again.”** In the original Greek, the pronoun *you* is plural in vs7. You, all of you, must be born again! Jesus is talking to you! The preferable translation of the original text would be ... **“It is necessary for you to be born again.”** In vs6 Jesus tells us why rebirth is so very necessary to enter the kingdom of God, **“Flesh gives birth to flesh.”**

Jesus’ use of *flesh* refers to the sinful nature (1Cor 15:50; John 1:13; Rom 8:6,7) Literally **“That which is born of the flesh is flesh.”** Anyone born of sinful parents must likewise be sinful. The child inherits the sinful nature from his/her parents. It’s not the baby’s personal fault, but it is nonetheless a result of the parent’s condition. We also know that *flesh* here refers to the sinful nature because Jesus contrasts it with the Holy Spirit. The sinful flesh is in direct opposition to the Holy Spirit, who is holy and righteous. Anyone who remains flesh as he is by nature cannot enter the kingdom of God unless he is as the Spirit is, holy and without sin. He must be banned from God’s kingdom because of the sinful nature. Because of the nature of our sinful self, neither you nor I nor anyone can enter God’s kingdom of glory. What is worse, by nature, our sinful self takes away any opportunity for us as individuals to earn or come to God on our own.

The sinful flesh is ignorant of God, shows contempt for God, does not have a true fear (admiration) of God nor does it trust in God, and has the inability to love God. Instead it seeks and loves carnal things, seeks pleasures of the body, worldly wisdom and self-righteousness. According to that sinful flesh, everything depends on me, the world revolves around me and who I am and what I’ve done with my life - my rank in the Army, my paycheck, my home, my education, my many travels, my trophies, my grades. The sinful nature thinks, “What a treasure I am because of who I am and what I have.”

Yesterday at the Yard Sale someone made the comment, “One man’s junk is another man’s treasure.” At Yard Sales you can find and, for a price, have that treasure. But the treasure of the kingdom of God is not a treasure you sought out, but rather it sought you. It is not a treasure that you had to pay for or earn, but was earned and given to you. It was not something that you did, but something that was done to you and for you.

Jesus said, **“That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”** (vs6) In other words, everyone in whom the Holy Spirit brings about a rebirth is spirit, that is, opposite of the sinful flesh, he or she has a new nature and new life, they have been born again. (Eph 4L24; Col 3:10) Jesus said that only those in whom the Holy Spirit has given a new nature and new life, they and only they can enter the kingdom of God. Jesus explains so clearly how the Holy Spirit works rebirth, **“No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”** (vs6) The Holy Spirit works wherever his Word is faithfully proclaimed and whenever his Word is attached to water.

The teaching that the Holy Spirit works rebirth through baptism slaps the sinful nature in the face... no, better yet, it stomps on its head and destroys it. Nicodemus was shocked

to hear that salvation did not depend on him. So also your sinful nature cringes and screams when it hears that the kingdom of God does not depend on its works and efforts, but on the Holy Spirit and his coming to you through water and the Word. At your baptism, the Holy Spirit came to you through the water and drowned your sinful nature. Baptism created in you a new life. Baptism brought you out of Satan's kingdom into Christ's kingdom. Through baptism, you are an heir of all the blessings God gives to the children of his kingdom – forgiveness of your many sins, salvation from death, from Satan's power and from your sinful nature, and gives you heaven itself. For through baptism God gives you his Son, Jesus, who lived without a sinful nature, pure and holy, free from sin, to earn your forgiveness and gave you that gift through your baptism. Who died so that you might live, and gave you that gift through baptism. Who rose so that you will live forever, and gave you that gift through Baptism.

There were many treasures found at the yard sale yesterday. But how much more is the eternal treasure that is your baptism!

My dear friends, it is necessary for you to be born again. Rebirth is necessary for salvation, necessary to enter the kingdom of God. Thank God that you have been baptized! Thank God that your rebirth has been given to you freely, through water and the Spirit! I sincerely pray that the Holy Spirit keep you in your baptism grace all the days of your life. Amen.

^a Or *born from above*; also in verse 7

^b Or *but spirit*

^c The Greek is plural.

^d Some manuscripts *Man, who is in heaven*

^e Or *believes may have eternal life in him*

^f Or *his only begotten Son*
