

Sermon for Feb. 17th 2008 John 3 1-17

After church last Sunday I walked to my car in the staff parking lot and found on my windshield a flyer that said “Decision 2008 - 7 reasons why so and so is the choice for born again Christians.” All kinds of things crossed my mind when I first read this. To be honest – my first thought was whoever put this on my windshield must have no idea that they were in an Episcopal Church parking lot. We don’t use terms like “born again”.

My next thought was – “this is very interesting – what is God trying to tell me – after all this is the exact text I will be preaching on and I’ve been avoiding this part of the lesson because I don’t want to deal with it.” God was not letting me out that easy. I realized that I really did need to wrestle with and preach on this “born again” topic. Yikes!

Finally I thought about Jesus’ answer to Nicodemus that we heard in our gospel lesson today “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above (also translated as born again).” I at that point realized that the question that kept ringing in my ears was “what does it mean to be born again, or born from above?”

So... I began my prayerful quest to find some answers.

The Greek verb *anōthen* is translated as both from above, and again –which is why you will hear either the translation you heard today – born from above – or from other translations – born again.

Part of my own difficulty with understanding the born again language is the fact that as Episcopalians we don't use this type of language in speaking about our faith and further more some of us even cringe a little bit when we hear it – it is not our custom to ask a person if they have been born again or “saved”. We've all heard of people who can pinpoint the day and time and location wherein they were born anew where they actually knew their lives were changed in an instant and perhaps some of you have had that experience. I believe that is a true gift.

I can not mark a day as a specific day and time wherein I remember this instant transformation. I have had times in my life where I knew God was present and these have helped me make changes in my life, but there is not a specific date wherein I can say – this day I did not have Christ in my life- and the next day I did.

In the Episcopal church we do celebrate being born anew in the sacrament of baptism which is incredibly important however, I believe being born from above in the way that Jesus is speaking of it here has an additional significance to it.

Being born again, or born from above is *a transforming acceptance and belief in God's unconditional love*. A love which is portrayed through God's giving of His only son in order to save the world. Because of acceptance of this unconditional love, one's very being is transformed into new life.

Being born again is to undergo a radical change that is like a new birth, however, I do not believe that this transformation has to happen in an instant.

For example, let's look at Nicodemus. I have grown to love Nicodemus. We do not know a lot about him but what we do know is the following:

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Pharisee's in Jesus' time were considered the aristocrats of Jerusalem. They were known as a brotherhood which they entered into by taking a pledge in front of three witnesses that they would spend all of their lives observing every detail of the scribal law. The name Pharisee means the separated one and the Pharisees were those who had separated themselves from all ordinary life in order to keep every detail of the law. For Nicodemus – a Pharisee – to approach Jesus at all was astonishing.

We also know that Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews. This is to say that he was a member of the Sanhedrin which was a court of 70 members and was the supreme court of the Jews. One of the duties of the Sanhedrin was to examine and deal with anyone suspected of being a false prophet. It was a miracle of grace that Nicodemus overcame his prejudices and his upbringing and his whole view of life to acknowledge Jesus as a “teacher who has come from God.”

We are told later in the gospel of John that Nicodemus appeared as part of the Jewish council and while the council was discussing the ways to eliminate Jesus Nicodemus raised the question of justice and spoke up about it.

Finally our last picture of Nicodemus in the gospel of John shows him joining Joseph of Arimathea in asking for Jesus' body in order to provide for its burial.

Nicodemus continued to be transformed by accepting God's unconditional love throughout the ministry of Jesus and thereafter. His rebirth or transformation happened over time- yet it was still through his acceptance of and belief in God's unconditional love that he was transformed. For many of us this transformation is like that of Nicodemus. We ask questions. We let God in and then shut Him out and then let Him in again.

The amazing thing to me about this gospel lesson for today is that this unconditional love of God that allows us to be born anew is offered to each and every one of us – to the entire world- and all we have to do is open our hearts and accept that love.

Our acceptance of that love is what radically transforms us into new life, whether it be in an instant, or over time, or both. And the acceptance of this love and our love in return changes the world. It is an infectious love – that we catch and then spread. It is from the essence of this love that our actions arise. We can not in any reality say that we love a person and then do things which hurt or grieve that person's heart.

It is through the accepting of and belief in God's unconditional love for us that we are enabled to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is this transforming love that makes it possible for us to face our fears, feed the hungry, and forgive our enemies. It is this transforming love that permits us to acknowledge our weaknesses, accentuate our God given gifts, and accept love in return.

It is in being born anew – in being transformed by accepting God’s unconditional love – that we, like Nicodemus. Can see the kingdom of heaven. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. May we go forth accepting and embracing this life changing love.