

“But do not be in awe about my having said to you, it is necessary that you be born from above.”

I don't know how many of you were in church cultures as children and/or as adults where you heard the phrase 'born again'. Or, whether one of your peers ever asked you if you were 'born again'? In the black church community I grew up in, the question was asked, 'are you saved'? And, being a respectful Presbyterian child I would think, but not ask, 'saved from what?' If you have been exposed to or a part of theologies that asked this question, today's Gospel is the centerpiece of that theology. This passage from John is renown as the basis for the theology of rebirth, of 'being born again'. We Episcopalians only require one birth into belief, that is, we don't baptize a reawakening, if you will, to the presence of the Triune God in our lives. As one of our colleagues noted at the Clericus meeting last week, we may reawaken to God hundreds of times in our lives. Grace gives us that opportunity.

Nevertheless, many have interpreted the text in 3.3, 'if a person is not born from above, they will not see the kingdom of heaven' to mean that being born from above is to be reborn, to 'be born again', 'saved'. I look at 'being born from above' as a new life, perhaps one from unbelief into belief; but, a life that is able to perceive the world as God wants us to see it, that is, as the kingdom of heaven.

The art that is used for the Lectionary this week on Vanderbilt Divinity School's website is a depiction of Nicodemus' midnight visit to Jesus. And, I love the way the artist depicted these

two learned men, sitting in deep discourse. And, if you check out the art you'll note the artist places Jesus higher in the perspective in the painting, yet sitting with equality with Nicodemus. John's Jesus goes to great lengths to explain to Nicodemus what he means by being born from above, and his explanation provides good news for even us who require the Christian birth of only one baptism to begin the journey of perhaps many rebirths we hope will gain us entry into the kingdom of heaven.

Nicodemus being a Pharisee, one who upheld Mosaic and the purity laws, wants to know how one can be born if one has already been born. 'We can't go back to our mother's wombs a second time, especially if we are old', he reasons. Birth had all kinds of impurity attached to it in the 1st Century Judean culture that remained attached to it into Christian practice. In Bozzuti-Jones' biography of Bishop Barbara Harris, *The Mitre Fits Just Fine*, he describes her mother's piety and the practice of the Church in his retelling of Bishop Harris' mother's return to church after giving birth to her. After service was over Aunt Bea, as we called her, remained on the front pew for a blessing that would restore her body to its pre-birth sanctity. This occurred in 1930, the 20th century. Yet, Jesus had already removed the concept of birth from rebirth, moved it from flesh and moved it to God, so as to remove the impurity associated with it. He explained to Nicodemus that birth that occurred in God came from heaven and not from the flesh. And, yet, even in the 20th century we were still trying to grasp this concept of being born in God, being born in the Spirit.

But, this is good news because with new birth coming from heaven, both men and women are free of any need to be cleansed, and are thus *both* able to begin the journey to the kingdom of heaven. Thus, new birth is a great equalizer.

So Jesus is teaching us to be born, not with cleansing, but with the spirit of God blowing new life into us as God did in the beginning with the first humans. Just as God gave the first humans Creation, Jesus reintroduces God as our co-Creator in our new beginnings.

The purpose of the new life is not just to be ‘reborn’, not just to believe anew, in my estimation, but to enter and live in the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not a post-death place for which we must wait ‘by and by’ as the old Negro Spiritual proffers; but, is here and now. And, Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus is our instruction for finding it. First Jesus says that to even perceive the kingdom of God you must be born from God, and that to *enter* it, you must be born of water and the spirit. Now, of course, Christianity has incorporated the water and the spirit into the sacrament of baptism as our acceptance of new life in Christ. But, Jesus did not end there. Accepting him is not the goal. His goal was for us to enter the kingdom of heaven with this new birth by water and the spirit. This is more than a state of being, but a place we’re supposed to be. Just as in the Old Testament reading God told Abraham he had to leave his father and his homeland, we are required to leave what we are familiar with and go someplace that may not be so familiar. Changing our course may not be what we have in mind. After all, do we know where this kingdom of heaven is? And what are we supposed to do when we get

there?

Well, if Jesus instructs that being born of God will allow us to see it, we must be seeing the things that God sees, or as God sees them. Seeing in the ancient world meant seeing with the heart. So being able to see the kingdom of God must mean, as a start, we are seeing things with our hearts. Being born anew then is a change in the heart. And, our Baptismal Covenant is the way that leads our hearts into the kingdom of God. By ‘being in fellowship with each other, resisting evil, proclaiming and living the Gospel, seeking and serving Christ in all persons, and, working for justice and peace and respecting the dignity of all, we are able to perceive God. And, if we are seeing with our hearts, it must, also, mean we are perceiving the world with love, the same kind of love God has for us. “For God so beloved the world ...”. Do we know that Jesus is telling us that for God to breathe new life into us, we, too, must love the world as God does? In dying a violent death, Jesus showed us the brokenness of the world. And, in raising Jesus from death, God showed us the light of resurrection of being in alignment with God and with each other that awaits us in the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, when we get there. Jesus establishes for us a new relationship with God, one that allows us to renew our lives, loving God and, therefore, loving each other as God loves us.

I am following in Mother Barbara’s footsteps and have begun taking classes in the PA Advocacy Program at Women In Need because, paraphrasing Luke, ‘the harvest is great, but the laborers

are few'. And, although the work of WIN is cruciform in that it centers on the violence that shatters individuals' lives, its very being is the light of resurrection. Its very being has entered into the kingdom of God. They are not content to say they have identified the problem, but work with it and at it so that if even one family is given the opportunity to be made whole, to be reborn in the image that God had intended for them, then, their work is resurrection. The whole family walks in the light of Christ whether or not they are believers because this organization loves them so much, they give of themselves to end the brokenness they perceive in this world. This is living in the kingdom of God, where by renewing our hearts as co-creators with God, we find ourselves.

It begins with the breaking of the bread to allow the in-breaking of God in our hearts, but it doesn't end there. We must be in alignment with God even if that means being born anew a hundred times, and we must be in alignment with each other, to love each other as God loves us, to be able to enter and live in God's kingdom, here and now, and forever, too. Amen.