

John (3: 1-17)

Are you born again? I'll repeat the question because I'm sure you're not used to hearing it. . . Are you born again? Jesus said to Nicodemus, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Now you and I live in what has been called the buckle of the Bible Belt. And I'm sure a substantial number of our fellow Christians this morning would describe themselves as *born again*. But I suspect that many of you sitting here today that terminology might prove itself to be a bit strange. That born again is not your first definition of who you are. . . . so let's spend some time during the sermon thinking about what being born again means.

Several years ago, a ten-year-old girl in my parish attended a church camp one summer with a friend of hers. The camp was run by another denomination and that the end of the week she came home and she was in tears. She had been told in no uncertain terms that she was going to hell because she had not been born again. Now this was a ten-year-old girl. An adult counselor had told her this. . . and the child was scared and confused. She had been baptized, she was in church every Sunday, she made her communion every Sunday and now. . . . now if she was being told that she was going to hell because she had not been born again. . . .and that girl had no idea what they were talking about.

I think many of us find ourselves a bit defensive when confronted with this kind of language. And incidents such as this with my young parishioner certainly don't help. Let me tell you I found myself angry, that this child had been so hurt. And so her parents and I began trying to help her understand what had happened at Camp.

Isn't it sad. Isn't it sad that there is so much unnecessary argument over this passage of Scripture. There is so much judgment rendered on those who understand it one way or another.

In preparing the sermon I remembered a story from the Talmud that has a great meaning for me. As I think about how often we tend to pass judgments on others. A story is this. An aged man whom Abraham hospitably invited to his tent refused to join him in prayer to the Lord God. Abraham discovered that this man was a fire worshipper and so he drove him out of his tent into the desert. That night, God appeared to Abraham in a vision and said that I have put up with that ignorant man for seventy years. Could you not have patiently suffered him one night?

God is so much more patient and far less judgmental than we. Saint John concluded the story of Nicodemus with what is probably the most familiar passage of Scripture, John three sixteen. . . . "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. . . . God . . . so. . . . loved. . . . the world.

This morning. You and I are led to contemplate the nature of Divine Love. The collet this day begins by saying that God's glory is always to have mercy. . . Always. . . .There are no limits, on that Divine Mercy.

This is our God. Whose so loved the world, that He gave his only Son. That's not human love. All too often our love is conditional love. . . . if you do this or thator if you believe this or that. . . or if you love me back. . . . then. . . . then I'll love you.

But God, so loved the world with His Divine Love, that whatever else the differences between us and God might be. . . . This is the difference to end all differences. Because God loves, He gave Himself. . . . Not to condemn. . . . But to say. . . The gift of God's Love has only one. . . one purpose. . . . To save us. . . .And we call that Divine Love, "Grace".

John (3: 1-17)

There are two aspects of God's love two properties of grace. The first is what we usually think ofGod's Love is pure unconditional Love, it is a gift. It is acceptance. . . it is forgiveness. . . it is pardon. We are saved by grace through faith. Abraham was saved by grace through faith. But there's another side another aspect to grace which we sometimes overlook.

The grace of God is also the transforming power of God's Spirit. God's grace renews and empowers those he has pardoned had acceptedyou see those two sides of grace?

It's freely given Love. . . fairly given acceptance by God and. . . and it is transforming Love. And it is this transforming Love that Jesus is talking about in his conversation with Nicodemus.

We were told that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Why? Why I think it's because he didn't want to be seen by others . . . Nicodemus didn't want to be embarrassed. I suppose Nicodemus was the closest thing to a Jewish Episcopalian I know. You see Nicodemus was an important man. He had status in life. And he didn't want to be caught seeking something he didn't have. He didn't want anyone to know that he felt incomplete and empty. After all Nicodemus had done all the right things. . . he was the leader of the congregation. He was an esteemed public servant. He could justify himself and his existence by his good works. Someone has said Nicodemus t is works seeking grace.

I think that's pretty good. Works seeking grace. He wanted to cling to the things that gave him meaning and status and he wasn't about to give up and let the Spirit of God control him. And that's why he came to Jesus by night. . . he had his pride. He had his P.H.D. thank you very much and yet here he was coming to see this itinerant preacher and healer. And what happens? Jesus tells him of the transforming, empowering, Grace of God. The Grace of God which will change him.

It's the same Grace of God which would change you and me. Renewing, rebirthing, remaking us. So that we who have known God's *Saving Grace* will also know God's *Transforming Grace*. And so Jesus tells Nicodemus the wind, the spirit, blows where it will., , you must be born from above. . . you must be born again. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. . . to recreate us. . .to give us new hearts.

That little girl, who was so devastated by the judgmental attitude at that church camp, came to realize that she *had received Jesus into our life* and that she was being made new and was being born again. And she came to understand that that had started at her baptism and was continuing to happen as she loved and served God. She came to see and understand that it is more of a process than a single event.

God so loved the world. . . He so loved you and me. . . . That we can be renewed again and again. That we can be converted again and again. . . .be reborn again and again and again. My prayer for us this morning, Is that we might open our hearts to receive the Spirit of God. . . .The Divine Gift. . . Whose name is Jesus, is given not to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through Him. The divine gift of new birth is given. Not for judgment. . . .But for salvation.

Thanks be to God. . . .Amen.