

You Must Be Born Again
Jn 3:1-17

Affirmation #6: Regeneration

"We believe that man was created by God in His own image; that he sinned and thereby incurred physical, spiritual and eternal death, which is separation from God, that as a consequence, all human beings are born with a sinful nature and are sinners by choice and therefore under condemnation. We believe that those who repent and forsake sin and trust Jesus Christ as Savior are regenerated by the Holy Spirit and become new creatures, are delivered from condemnation and receive eternal life."

The goal of the last four weeks of studying the Affirmations about the Trinity from our Baptist General Conference statement of basic doctrine -- one week on the Trinity as a union of three persons and then a week apiece on each of the three persons individually -- has been more than just to strengthen our understanding of historical, Christian doctrine. I hope it has done some of that. But I hope it has done more than that.

I'm a long way from presuming that I've been as effective as I'd like in accomplishing the goals I have for preaching through these affirmations with you, but I should at least let you know what I'm aiming for. In preaching about the character and identity of God for the last four Sundays, I haven't wanted to settle for just informing you who God is and what the scriptures teach and the church believes he is like, as crucial as that information is.

He is infinite and majestic, great in mercy, author of life and hope, guarantor of our eternal inheritance, who strengthens us by trials, who emptied himself to live with us in the flesh, who loved us to the point of suffering and death, and who leads us in his steps to growth and to wholeness, who convicts our hearts and empowers our choices, and points us by his Spirit to glory. All of those things we've learned about God and all of those things are true. But if doctrine doesn't give way to doxology then all that information is just going to get stuck in your head, or worse yet forgotten, without ever reaching your heart and catching fire in love and in worship.

That would be like staying home on Valentines Day and reading a book about the person you love instead of going out to dinner and staring in each others eyes and enjoying being with each other. Doctrine without doxology makes us scholars, but it won't make us saints, or bring us salvation.

The more we know about each other before we go out to dinner, the more richly and deeply we ought to be able to enjoy being with each other, so I don't want to point us to sainthood at the neglect of being good scholars in the school of God (that's one way the old Puritans used to describe the activity of the church). But I hope that our study of God is doing everything it can to paint such an attractive picture of God that the more we know of him the more we want to relate to him and to love him and to fall on our knees in worship of him.

Valentines Day is a good time to remind ourselves that God is a God of love and that his work in us isn't complete until (as the old hymn says) we are "lost in wonder, love, and grace."

That means that if the last four affirmations, in fact if the last five affirmations including the goal of the Word of God, have done what they're supposed to, then the next question that should be on our mind is the one that this week's affirmation answers: How do I get myself into a loving relationship with this God? How can I be his child? How can I make him my King? How can I see his Kingdom?

That's the question that Nicodemus comes to Jesus with in John ch.3. "Teacher, we know that you teach a lot of good things about God. We're even sure that you have a Word straight from God himself that we can trust, because no one can do these signs and miracles that you do unless God is with him. Tell us more about this God. Tell us how we can get to the Kingdom he has been promising us for lo, these many centuries."

Jesus answers with the word of this sixth affirmation. The answer is "regeneration." Well, that's the fancy word for it anyway. Generation means birth. And 're-' means again. Jesus says "unless one is 'born again' he cannot see the Kingdom of God." Unless one is regenerated there is no getting to God.

Now there's good news and bad news in the fact that this term "born again" has become much more familiar to us than it was when Nicodemus first heard Jesus say those words. The good news is that we don't have to be convinced that this must be the right answer. We've known this is the way to God for 2000 years now. Our hymns use the word. Our tracts, and our preachers, and the gifts we buy in the Christian bookstores all use the word. Even some of our presidents have made the words "born again" famous and well known in the secular culture. So the good news is: they're not quite so startling as they were when Nicodemus first heard them.

The bad news is... that they're not quite so startling as they were when Nicodemus first heard them. And we miss a very startling point that Jesus was clearly trying to make to this friendly Pharisee when they met here in the dark of night. You can just see how much John is stressing here how bewildered Nicodemus was by what Jesus was trying to tell him. Jesus seems to be calculating his words to startle Nicodemus. And if we don't recapture that bewilderment, we're going to miss Jesus' main point.

It's just like the offense of the gospel that we talked about last week. It's going to sound like foolishness to anybody who doesn't have God's Holy Spirit working in his heart to help him welcome this message. Because there's a deliberate belly-blow here, straight to the pride.

Look at Nicodemus's responses as he tries to understand Jesus all the way through this passage. (v.4) What do you mean born again? How can you be born when you're old? Are you talking about crawling back inside your mother and coming out again? What in the world do you mean? No one could ever do what you're suggesting! (v.7) Jesus says, "Don't marvel that I say to you 'You must be born again.' Why does he have to say that? Because Nicodemus is marveling! He's cleaning out his ears, asking Jesus to clarify all this nonsense. He asks again in v.9: "How can these things be?!"

This is a perplexing conversation for Nicodemus, and everything Jesus says only reinforces the very point that is baffling poor Nicodemus here.

Jesus starts off with this statement that seems to erect a mystifying obstacle: Unless you undergo birth again, you'll never see the Kingdom of God. And when Nicodemus asks him if he could possibly be hearing him right -- he has to get inside his mother and come back out again? -- Jesus doesn't laugh at the misunderstanding and say, oh I didn't mean something impossible like that. He says something that only makes things more difficult. You've got to undergo this birth by the Spirit. The Kingdom of God is spiritual. So the Spirit is going to have to give birth to you.

Now Nicodemus is thinking: At least I could have found my mother. But now not only do I have to undergo birth again, I've got to undergo it by some sort of thing I can't even see. And instead of Jesus' reassuring him that it's nothing so difficult as all that, Jesus goes on to reinforce that very concern in Nicodemus's mind: This Spirit who has to give birth to you is like the wind. It blows on its own schedule, and you don't have any power to know, let alone control, where it comes from and where it goes. That's how it is with being born of the Spirit.

So Nicodemus is left perplexed and helpless and without any answers that seem to tell him what to do. And Jesus is closing every escape route that would let Nicodemus find his own way into the Kingdom of God by some device that is in his own control.

The reason Jesus leaves Nicodemus -- and us -- so helpless and perplexed is the very same reason we met last week when we studied the work of the Holy Spirit. The reason for our helplessness is our sin.

Jesus had said in John ch.16 that the Spirit would come to convict us that we are sinners, and that apart from his persuasive work we would naturally do nothing but reject the glory the Spirit came to point us to.

Paul said the same thing in 2 Cor 2:14. The natural man doesn't welcome the things of the Spirit of God. They are foolishness to him and he isn't able to comprehend them because they are spiritually appraised. Only the one in whose heart the Spirit has done his persuasive, powerful work will welcome and not reject the offense of the gospel: (namely) that only if God himself comes to die for me do I have any grounds for life in God's presence. Sin is that bad. In fact, only if Christ has paid the penalty for my condemnation can the Spirit, with any justice, even start the persuasive work in this sinner's heart.

The reason all these texts cut us off at every pass when we try to use our own natural powers and understanding to come into God's Kingdom is that we are in our natural state born into sin. The first impulse we have in our lives is to take care of #1, me, my glory. "In sin did my mother conceive me." "All we like sheep have gone astray."

As the affirmation summarizes our state, although God created mankind originally in his own image, the first man, Adam, sinned, and in and with Adam, we all chose to rely on ourselves instead of on God. We all sinned, and thereby incurred physical, spiritual and eternal death, separation from God. We were all born with a sinful nature, and we are all sinners by choice.

We are therefore, every one of us, under righteous condemnation for our sin. We have trusted ourselves. We have deeply insulted God by ignoring his advice in favor of our own. God in his holiness has no choice but to condemn us if he is going to maintain his integrity as a holy and a just God.

So we are dead. Dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph 2:5). As able as a corpse to live before God and to move toward God on our own.

This is the point that Jesus wants to drive home to Nicodemus. We sinners have as little to do with making ourselves alive to God as a foetus does with coming to birth. We're born into life by the will of our parents and the grace of God, and we are born again into eternal life by the will of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God.

Sin makes us helpless not because of some physical power or constraint that keeps us from doing what we want. Sin makes us helpless because even though we have the ability to say yes to God, we are blindly in love with our sins and we don't want to.

We are helplessly in love with our passions, like Esau was in Genesis with that bowl of stew, and we would give up our birthright to have our puny, little, immediate desires satisfied. Can we change all that with willpower? Have you ever tried?

Jeremiah asks in ch.13:23 -- "Can the Ethiopian change his skin? Can the leopard change his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil.

Paul asks (1 Cor 2:14), Can the natural man welcome the things of the Spirit of God? No, they're foolishness to him. Jesus asks (Mt 19:24), Can a man in love with his money enter into the Kingdom of God? It would be easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle.

When we are in love with our sins, we are dead -- dead to God and without any hope of eternal life. Worse than dead, in fact: Paul says (in Rom 8:7-8) that "the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it won't submit to God's law; indeed it cannot." Why can't it? Not because we lack the physical ability. It's the simplest thing in the world to say Lord, I give up the driver's seat. You take over my life. I surrender it to you. What we lack is the will to do that because we love being in control of ourselves. We love thinking we can fix our own problems. That's why we're hostile to God. But Paul goes on -- "those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

And when we cannot please God, that doesn't mean he is just indifferent to us. His sentiments of justice are enraged at our hostility and our rejection of him for ourselves.

Jonathan Edwards is sometimes dismissed as an extreme Puritan for his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God." But when he says that our sins suspend us over the fire of hell like a spider on a thin strand of silk and only the sheer mercy of God keeps us from falling into the flames this very moment, he was not only in dead earnest; he had all the testimony of the Word of God backing him up.

What he says in the selection there in the bulletin's meditation is still true 302 years after the birth of Jonathan Edwards: The state of those that are daily and hourly in the danger of God's great wrath and the infinite misery we deserve for our sin is unimaginably dreadful. And that state is the dismal state of every soul in this congregation that has not been born again -- however moral and strict, sober and religious, we may otherwise be. Young, old -- we all need to stand in Nicodemus's shoes before Jesus and recognize that we are wholly at the mercy of God, and of his Spirit who blows where he will.

Jesus deliberately chooses this analogy of being born again because it is like being born the first time. Regeneration is something that we don't cause to happen. It happens to us. The Spirit *causes* it to happen as he convicts us of our sin, empowers us to rise from our deadness to God and points us to genuine glory.

Peter said the same thing in our call to worship this morning. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to his great mercy, *caused* us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Apart from the life-giving, persuasive, empowering work of the Spirit blowing a fresh wind through our hearts, we remain right where today's affirmation puts us: we are "sinners by choice and therefore under condemnation." There is, as Jonathan Edwards said in his own time, reason to think that there are many in this congregation now hearing this discourse, that will be the subjects of this very misery of condemnation to all eternity.

So the question we asked last week confronts us again even more powerfully and personally. If the natural person isn't able to welcome the things of God because they are spiritually discerned, if the natural person who is dead in sin and unable to please God because he is hostile to God and in love with his sin, then how is the natural man ever going to come to a saving knowledge of the truth? Every time he hears it and understands it, he rejects it. What's the person to do? What's a poor evangelist to do? The more the unbeliever understands, the more they push the gospel away. The harder the evangelist works, the more the sinner wants to crucify the God that the gospel puts forward.

And the Bible's answer, Christ's answer, God's answer is: pray. Pray for regeneration. Pray for the Spirit to do a work in the heart. Pray that God according to his great mercy will give birth to new life by causing Nicodemus, by causing our friends, by causing us, to be born again.

At this point in his conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus is disarmed. There's nothing he can do by himself to remedy his desperate realization that his sins have him enslaved to his hostility to God. He can't do anything good, because like Paul (in Rom 7:18) he confesses that "no good thing dwells within me, that is in my flesh." And so Nicodemus is still perplexed.

Does Jesus let him off the hook at this point? Does he say, but of course this has to happen to you, so you're not really responsible for it? There's nothing you can do but sit and wait? No, Jesus doesn't leave him that space to wiggle out of his responsibility for sin, either. Listen to his answer to Nicodemus's question in v.10.

Nicodemus asks him, How can this be that my only hope is in doing something that my sin keeps me from doing? And Jesus doesn't say, oh, right, these are just mysteries that you'll never understand. It's not really your fault. He says, "Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you don't understand these things? We are speaking of things for which there is testimony and evidence to see." There is nothing too hard to understand or to do here. Your problem is only that you refuse to receive our testimony and believe the evidence that is in front of you.

And he leaves him with this command: You must be born again. You are commanded and required and responsible to do what you can't do. You must be born again.

Now Nicodemus is very perplexed. And the key to what Jesus is saying lies in unraveling this perplexity. How can Jesus command Nicodemus to be born again when being born again is something he's just made clear to Nicodemus he can't make happen to himself?

The answer to that perplexity is easier to see if we watch Jesus illustrate the answer he is trying to teach by making a similar command to another dead, helpless friend a few chapters later in John. How can Jesus reasonably command a man named Lazarus to come forth out of his tomb, when Lazarus is a corpse and can't possibly make that happen for himself?

Answer: the power to obey is given with the command to obey when Jesus gives the command. "Command what you will," St. Augustine prayed, "and will what you command." The resurrection of Lazarus was owing to one thing, and that one cause should get all the glory for it: the word of Jesus Christ came to him and commanded, "Come forth."

The word of Jesus Christ comes to us today, to helpless sinners, some of us still dead in our trespasses and sins, still in danger of God's terrible wrath and infinite misery. And Jesus word commands us: You must be born again!

If in hearing that command you still say, that's foolishness; I have to wait for God to show me mercy? He can't see all the good I do in this world and see how wrong it would be for him to send me to hell? He can't hold me responsible for something I can't do. If that's the response in our heart then we won't respond to Jesus' command, because we're still in love with ourselves. And frankly we just won't care. Because more important desires have us preoccupied.

But if there is a spark of desperation in the heart that says, No! I do care! What if the Spirit isn't blowing in my heart? What if I'm lost and might fall into the flames of separation from God for eternity? That would be awful! Then take heart. The good news is that that spark of desperation is the power of the Spirit blowing in your heart. You are understanding these things. The call into your tomb of sin is stirring in you to Come Forth! The power of the Spirit is at work in you to stir you into life and to bring you to new birth by the Spirit.

For the cry of the desperate heart, there is hope. Whosoever will, may be saved. Fan that spark. Don't grieve the Spirit by letting the spark die out. Look at the evidence in front of you of the mercy of God. Listen to the testimony of Jesus and the mighty cloud of witnesses who came before and after him.

Believe the truth: God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son to pay the penalty for our sin and its righteous condemnation, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. Believe the promise: God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

If that desperate cry for mercy at the foot of the cross is rising up in your heart, something amazing is happening. The wind of the Spirit is blowing where it will and it is blowing in your heart. That's grace. Amazing grace. And if it stops being amazing that the new birth should happen to you and to me, then we've begun trusting in ourselves and our own righteousness instead of in the grace of God.

But the good news of the Gospel is that when we hear the command in our grave to Come Forth, when we hear the command that we must be born again, we believe (with our affirmation) that those who repent and forsake sin and trust Jesus Christ as Savior are (i.e., have been!) regenerated by the Holy Spirit and become new creatures. We believe that we are delivered from condemnation. We believe that we will receive eternal life.

This is Amazing Grace. This is grace that we do not deserve: that while we were yet sinners Christ should die for us. That without any merits of our own, there is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. If the astonishment of that grace is the song in your heart this morning, join with us in closing this service as we sing it (hymn #260 – And Can It Be?). If the song's question, "Can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood," is a question in your heart that you care to find an answer to, there are deacons, there is a preacher, there are friends around you, who have discovered this Amazing Grace who can help you answer that question.

Yes! It can be--amazing as it is in view of our deep and offensive sin--that you and I can gain the Kingdom of God. That there is a genuine promise of no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because they have heard the command of Jesus, You must be born again. Let the Spirit blow God's resurrection life and power through the tomb of your sinful life so that you can begin to trust our great Savior!