

Last year on Trinity Sunday, I was coming to the church in Belfield to get ready for the service like I usually do early in the morning. And I noticed as I was going up to the door that there was a small pamphlet that had been hung in a bag on the doorknob. Some passing evangelist had left a little tract, and I had some time, so I figured I would open it up and just read it. See what it said. And not surprisingly, it talked about and asked the question, have you been born again? I'm not faulting these people for doing this. I think it's better to do something rather than nothing, even if I don't think that that method is all that effective. But the truth be told is, is that because people like that ask that question a lot, "have you been born again," we tend to shy away from it, don't we? We might even say something as Lutherans like, "Well, no. I'm not a born again Christian, because I'm not one of them. I'm not someone over there. I'm trying to distance myself, because there's all kinds of baggage attached to that question." But the truth is, Christians, that it's an important question to ask, because it's the very question that Jesus is asking today. And just because some Christians abuse it doesn't mean that we can't ask it. And so I ask you today: have you been born again? Do you know what it is to be part of the kingdom of God?

And this is an extremely important question to ask, because the consequences are so serious. Jesus says, "Unless you have been born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God." And you'll note what he says here, or rather what he does not say here. He doesn't say if you're a good person you'll see the kingdom of God. He does not say if your family is all Christian you will see the kingdom of God. He does not say if you do all the right things you will see the kingdom of God. Unless you have been born again, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. And so we need to answer this question for ourselves personally this day and understand what it is that Jesus is talking about.

Because if we don't understand the question, and if we don't understand where Jesus is coming from, we're going to be a lot like Nicodemus in our story for today. Because Nicodemus is a very educated man. He is one of the teachers of Israel, and he's a Pharisee. That means he's so serious about keeping the law of God that he not only tries to keep what has been written down, but he also tries to keep what he believes was handed down to Moses and was never written down. So he tries to keep the law twice over. That makes him a very serious, religious man. If anyone deserves to be in the kingdom, certainly it's a man like Nicodemus. And that's exactly what he's doing when he comes to Jesus by night, saying things like, "Rabbi, we know that you have come from God, because no one can do these things that you're doing unless God is with him." He's trying to show Jesus that he really understands what it is that God wants, really understands and therefore deserves to be in the kingdom. But Nicodemus is quite surprised, really, when Jesus ignores all of that. And he says to him, "Unless you have been born again, you cannot enter the kingdom of God."

And how often, Christians, are we like Nicodemus, trying to find some other way to get into the kingdom of God? Whether that would be through our works and imagining that we would get in that way. Whether that would be through our family being Christians and imagining that because we know Christians or because we have grown up as Christians, that must mean something. Or even saying, "Well, I'm a generally good person. It kind of evens out. I've done some bad things, but I've got a lot of good things too, so surely God's going to be merciful to me for that reason, right?" Well, no. Unless you have been born again, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. It's that simple. It's that straightforward.

And so we want to understand, then, how this new birth happens. Because when we understand, then we will be able to answer the question. And Jesus tells us very directly here in our text how the new birth happens. He says, "Unless you have been born of water and the Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God." So the most important thing, Christians, is not what we have done and not who we

are or anything like that, but what the Spirit is doing within us. That is the key. Because when we have the Spirit of God, we are made a new creation. When we have the Spirit coming to us, blowing where he wills, then we enter into the kingdom of God. And you'll note that does not say that we call the Spirit. It does not say that we force the Spirit to do anything. He goes where he wishes, just like the wind yesterday, blowing where it wished. No one was going to stop that, just as no one is going to stop the Spirit from doing what he wishes either.

But God has promised to be somewhere. The place that we normally encounter the Spirit is the very place that Jesus is talking about here in the Gospel of John, being born of water and the Spirit. In our baptisms, we receive the Holy Spirit. This is how God normally deals with us. Are there times when people come to faith without having been baptized? Of course there are. Are there times when someone might even be saved and go to heaven without ever having the chance to be baptized? Of course there are. And sadly, there are times too when people fall away from their baptisms and no longer believe, and so they lose the new birth. But we're not talking about these different cases. We're talking about the way in which God normally comes to us. And it's the way that I'm sure almost all of you, if not all of you, came to faith in the first place. When you were baptized, probably as little children, and the Holy Spirit came into your life and gave you that new birth, so that you will now see the kingdom of God. It's not what you did. It's not what you try to do. You were probably a little baby. There was very little you could do! But it is what God has done for you that has brought you into the kingdom.

But what does that look like, then, for us in our daily lives? What difference does the new birth make for us from day-to-day? Well, Jesus tells us that too. Because Nicodemus here does not yet fully understand what Jesus is talking about. He doesn't quite get it. He's a well-educated man. He's a teacher of Israel, but he doesn't get these basic things. But the Bible tells us that later on Nicodemus did start to believe. Nicodemus was one of the ones who tried to defend Jesus, and Nicodemus was also one of the ones who buried Jesus in that new tomb. It's a pretty safe bet to say that Nicodemus died a believer. He came to understand that grace is not by works, but by faith, by what God has done for him and not what he has done for God. But in this we see that that understanding, that grasping the things of God, comes with being born again. We begin to understand what it means to be a part of the kingdom. We have been made a new creation, because we are being made like Jesus in all things. To be born again, Christians, is to be like Jesus, to think like him, to act like him, to talk like him, to do everything like him. Because you are a new creation in God and all of these things he has given to you as a free gift, a gift which has come from the Spirit bringing you to new life, so that you will see the kingdom of God. Not because of what you have done, but because of what Jesus has done for you.

So I exhort you this day, Christians, to live like Christians. To live the way that God would have you be. To turn away from the works of darkness and the works of flesh, the things which belong to your former lives. Your new birth, being born again, has changed you forever. And because you are a new creation in him, you are being set free to be like Jesus in all things.

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.