

BORN AGAIN

A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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Four out of ten American adults these days identify themselves as "born again Christians."ⁱ The Greek phrase translated "born again" appears only twice in the Bible, thoughⁱⁱ -- both in today's gospel lesson.ⁱⁱⁱ What in the world does it mean to be born again, and does it apply to any of us here today?

The term has generally been used as a marker for evangelical or conservative Protestant Christians, as opposed to mainline or liberal Protestant Christians, as opposed to Roman Catholic Christians, and as opposed to Eastern Orthodox Christians. Indeed, many Americans who so identify would claim that others are not Christian at all if they haven't been "born again" in their particular sense. And, typically, that means having gone through a sudden, powerful personal conversion experience.^{iv}

John Stott, a prominent evangelical spokesman, prefers the term "regeneration" to "conversion." Conversion for Stott implies consciously repenting one's sin and turning to Christ, accepting him in faith as one's Lord and Savior. Regeneration emphasizes new birth as solely the work of God; it is indeed sudden and utterly transformational, but it cannot be self-generated through a personal sense of moral reformation. We might not even be conscious that it's happened, just as we were not conscious of our own birth experience and would not know our birthday unless our parents told us.^v

Let's get back into the gospel lesson for the day and look at what it actually says. A Jewish religious leader named Nicodemus comes to Jesus, honorifically calls him Rabbi or teacher, and then rather courageously says "We know you've come from God, for nobody can perform the miracles you do apart from the presence of God."^{vi} He's come secretly to Jesus at night, presumably because his Pharisaic community would not be pleased to hear him saying that Jesus had come from God, but he's doing his own independent thinking and bringing it directly to Jesus. He sounds almost as if he wants to become a disciple of Jesus, and in fact later he does.^{vii} Jesus responds to Nicodemus indirectly, but in a way that implies he doesn't want to be followed as a mere miracle-worker: "Truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again."^{viii} Nicodemus takes him literally and asks how to enter one's mother's womb a second time. Jesus's answer is that in order to enter the Kingdom of God one must be born of water and spirit.^{ix}

Here's where the commentators I've read start splitting all over the place. Does water and spirit mean baptism -- being born again through baptism? This has historically been the Roman Catholic position, as well as that of more liturgical Protestant denominations like Episcopalians and Lutherans.^x As we say in the sacrament of baptism performed here in Memorial Church, "We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism...Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit." Paul explains in his letter to the Romans that through baptism we rise with Christ to walk in newness of life.^{xi} In fact, in the next chapter of John, after the exchange with Nicodemus, Jesus goes out into the Judean countryside with his disciples to baptize people. However, the contrary view is that Nicodemus the Pharisee is listening to these words of Jesus without any knowledge

of Christian baptism, and he may well be hearing that new life will link physical birth -- the breaking of a mother's waters - - with spiritual rebirth.^{xii} "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."^{xiii} This reading from a Protestant commentary seems confirmed in the next sentence of the gospel lesson: "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."^{xiv} Yet, my Catholic commentary sees this very sentence as a gloss on the power of baptism. Being born of the flesh is not enough; it's only the outward manifestation of life. True life comes from the Spirit of God transforming the inner life, which begins for Christians in the initiatory sacrament of baptism.^{xv} Hence, the importance of a priest, or even a nurse, baptizing a defective newborn who is expected to die soon after physical birth.

However, John Stott, the evangelical, insists that baptism, important as it is, must never be confused with the kind of new birth that Jesus was presenting to Nicodemus: "The new birth is a deep, inward, radical change, worked by the Holy Spirit in the inner recesses of the human personality." Baptism is a sign of new birth, but it does not operate mechanically to effect what it signifies. He quotes a seventeenth century archbishop to the effect that infant baptism -- or any baptism -- is not fully effected until one believes...until one actually lays hold by faith of what God has mercifully granted us through the gift of his son, Jesus Christ.^{xvi}

And how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? These kinds of intricate theological debates, which have so split the Christian church and which have ultimately led to so much hatred and bloodshed down through the centuries, may thankfully not be of great interest to you sitting here in Memorial Church today. Is there anything else in today's gospel lesson that might prove helpful in thinking about our spiritual lives?

Jesus winds up a second time and uses another image for being born again: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."^{xvii} Jesus' offer of a new birth here is connected with wind. It doesn't sound like something one can lay hold of by conscious intent. The proper attitude would seem to be more like gratitude for an undeserved gift, and a radical openness to the variety of ways it chooses to envelop and massage us.

In fact, the gospel writer then goes on, in one of the most memorized verses of the New Testament, to explain the greatest undeserved gift of all -- God's love for the whole world, manifested by the presence on earth of Jesus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."^{xviii} For me, the new element here in understanding what it means to be born again is the enveloping love of God. Not only do we receive the physical gift of life in this world through our perishable bodies, but also our lives take on ultimate meaning beyond physicality through redeeming love. Our job is to receive that love unconditionally and joyfully from the spiritual wind that blows around us, and then to become channels of love ourselves to other people. Jesus is our exemplar. He shows us the way, the truth and the life of true, selfless love, even unto death. We are born again as we let go and let the love of God and love for our fellow human beings overwhelm us and transform our lives

There's one element of this beautiful gospel lesson that I find troubling, and in a sense deeply contradictory to its main message. It seems to be saying that those who don't believe exclusively in Jesus will be condemned. They will perish, rather than experiencing eternal life. As I read my New Testament as a whole, however, I can't square such a message with God's love for the world expressed through his son, Jesus Christ. For in explaining the greatest commandment to love God and neighbor, Jesus is the one who goes out of his way to identify a

hated foreigner, a non-Jew, and certainly not one of Jesus' own followers -- a Samaritan -- as the one who showed love to a stripped and beaten man lying alongside the dangerous road between Jerusalem and Jericho.^{xix} Jesus is the one who explains that in his father's house are not one, but many dwelling places.^{xx} Jesus is the one who reaches out to share meals with tax collectors and prostitutes and Roman soldiers.^{xxi} I know there is an exclusivist strain in the teachings of Jesus, but there is also a pluralist, universalist strain which competes with it. I like to think that Jesus' outstretched arms in the mosaics on the front of his church are for all people, no matter who they are or what they've done -- perhaps after a period of chastening for us all. That's the Jesus I personally have chosen to follow as my Lord and Savior, without denying other's spiritual paths with Jesus, or with other masters and teachers, and without presuming to judge whether there are sins which are ultimately unpardonable according to the One who asked us to forgive those who trespass against us.

So, in conclusion, what might it look like to be born again in our time and place, especially for those of us who wouldn't usually describe ourselves as "born again Christians"? I have a favorite John Cheever short story which might do it, called "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill."^{xxii} A thirty-six year-old New Yorker, well bred and well heeled, with a wife and four children, had come on hard times with his own business after he's left a major firm. He becomes ill tempered with his family and friends, risking a divorce, and soon begins housebreaking in his wealthy residential neighborhood to support his life-style. Then, one night as he's heading toward the next house to rob, this is how he describes what happens: "While I was walking toward the Pewters,' there was a harsh stirring in all the trees and gardens, like a draft on a bed of fire [Editorial comment: Note the wind blowing where it chooses], and I wondered what it was until I felt the rain on my hands and face, and then I began to laugh [Editorial comment: Note the baptismal role of water]. I wish I could say that a kindly lion had set me straight, or an innocent child, or the strains of distant music from some church, but it was no more than the rain on my head -- the smell of it flying up to my nose -- that showed me the extent of my freedom from ...the works of a thief...There were ways out off my trouble if I cared to make use of them. I was not trapped...And it was no skin off my elbow how I had been given the gifts of life so long as I possessed them, and I possessed them then -- the tie between the wet grass roots and the hair that grew out of my body, the thrill of my mortality that I had known on summer nights, loving the children and looking down the front of my wife's dress... It is not, as someone once wrote, the smell of corn bread that calls us back from death; it is the lights and signs of love and friendship."^{xxiii}

So there's being "born again," with all the elements of baptismal water...of wind blowing...of deep, inward, radical change, worked by the Spirit in the inner recesses of the human personality...of undeserved gifts of life and love, if only we can appreciate them. There's no self-generated moral reformation...no conscious repenting of one's sin and turning to Christ. Just sudden regeneration, out of the blue, utterly transformative. All without any divisive, exclusivist theology.

May we all have the experience of being born again. May the phrase not be used to stereotype or divide, but to liberate us for fully loving lives. May we hear the hymn that hails a new creation -- one in which love prevails in heaven and earth. Knowing that God is love, in the psalmist's words, may our help come from God, who made heaven and earth. May God keep us from all evil, keep our lives, and keep our going out and our coming in from this time on and forevermore. Amen.

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- ⁱ 2003 Gallup poll as reported at http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2005/01/27_godsofbusiness/galluppoll.shtml and 2001 Barna poll as reported at www.adherents.com/misc/BarnaPoll.html
- ⁱⁱ "Are Catholics Born Again?" Catholic Answers, (El Cajon, CA: 2004).
- ⁱⁱⁱ John 3: 1-17.
- ^{iv} New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 554.
- ^v John Stott, Evangelical Truth (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 88-90.
- ^{vi} Paraphrasing John 3: 2.
- ^{vii} Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 429.
- ^{viii} John 3: 4.
- ^{ix} John 3: 5.
- ^x Jerome Biblical Commentary, pp. 429-430; Oxford Bible Commentary (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 966.
- ^{xi} Romans 6:4.
- ^{xii} New Interpreter's Bible, p. 550.
- ^{xiii} John 3: 5.
- ^{xiv} John 3: 6.
- ^{xv} Jerome Biblical Commentary, p. 430.
- ^{xvi} Stott, Evangelical Truth, pp. 90-91.
- ^{xvii} John 3:8.
- ^{xviii} John 3:16.
- ^{xix} Luke 10:25-37.
- ^{xx} John 14: 2.
- ^{xxi} For example, see Matthew 9: 10; 11:19
- ^{xxii} John Cheever, "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," in The Stories of John Cheever (New York: Ballentine Books, 1985), pp. 300-320.
- ^{xxiii} Ibid., pp. 318-319.