

## **John's Gospel - 2/14/10 – John 3:1-17– The Mystery of Love**

What do you make of this Gospel passage and being “born again”? To our Lutheran ears these words – “born again, born anew or born from above” – sound strange. As with Nicodemus, many of us feel uneasy when asked, “Are you born again?” Our discomfort is with both the language and the experience. We’re not certain what a “born again” person looks like, and the ones who profess to be “born again” make us uncomfortable. Recently, I received an email from a young man struggling with his faith. He wrote: “What are your feelings on being ‘born again’? Upon much of my research I’ve discerned that while I have the correct principles and mindset of gratitude, serenity, and serving others as the basis of my true happiness, I must develop a personal relationship with Christ to truly achieve entry into the kingdom. In other words, it’s not enough to be a good person and act kindly without expectations. I have to be truly spiritual. Not fully understanding what that means or how to go about it, I’m researching being reborn.”

As with Nicodemus, if this young man is going to understand being “reborn,” he is going to make the long and arduous journey from his head to his heart. Christianity is not a set of doctrines to be believed as much as it is a relationship in which we live. Relationships are rooted not in logic but in trust. They’re mysterious in that we don’t really know or understand why we’re attracted to one person and not another, or why we’ll open up and become close to one person and not another. They’re also messy in that they’re unpredictable; we can never fully understand the other person or anticipate her or his mood or reaction. Even though we know better, we say and do things that hurt. In John’s Gospel, Jesus invites us into the mystery and wonder of an intimate relationship based on deep trust and affection for God and each other. It is giving oneself totally and freely for the good of the other – God for us and we for God - and experiencing oneness that defies explanation. It is love that is deeply felt and experienced; love that is self-giving and therefore self-sacrificing.

In meeting with a couple as part of their premarital counseling, I was struck when the bride-to-be talked about her fiancée being a good listener. “I’m a good talker,” she laughingly said, “and he’s a good listener. I can talk and talk and talk, and he listens, really listens and reflects back what he hears. When he does, I feel like I’m the most important person in the world. I feel so valued and loved. I feel so close to him.” As she said this her face lit up and her whole countenance changed. It’s the effect that love has upon our lives. This is what being born anew is about: falling in love with God and giving our hearts and minds to God as we deeply commit our lives to living God’s way. It’s experiencing God listening ever so closely to what we say and our listening to God’s Word. The heart of our faith is the Great Commandment to love God with everything we are and have, and our neighbor as much or more than our selves. This is the driving force of our lives.

For us Lutherans, being “born again” is a daily dying and rising; dying to self and rising with Christ to serve God’s purpose. It’s remembering each day that God is for us, that God’s claim in baptism, that we are beloved children, is true. This is our orientation as we walk each day in God’s grace, sent out each morning with the words, “I love you; I am with you; remember who you are and to whom you belong.” In return, we carry God’s love deep in our hearts, and it gives rise to how we see and treat others.

On this Valentine’s Day we might ask ourselves: “To whom have we given our hearts? Have we given our hearts to Christ?” What does this relationship look like? Are we intentional in spending time with God? Are we getting to know God better through reading the Scriptures? Do we converse in prayer? Are we conscious of God’s presence and seek to honor God by serving others? Can others see the difference that Christ makes in our lives? Has our countenance changed? Each day we are “born anew” to the hope that is within us, a hope that is grounded in our relationship with Christ, in God’s promise to be with us and for us in life. Each day we turn to this relationship to draw strength and encouragement, joy and comfort. As our confirmands proclaim their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, as they freely choose to follow him this day, I wonder how their relationship with Christ will transform their lives. Jesus invites them, as he has us, to enter into a lifelong relationship of surprises, joy and discovery. It’s the mystery of growing close to another person as we open ourselves and become vulnerable to one another. This is what the spiritual life is about: living in the mystery of God’s love and growing closer to Christ as Christ’s love grows in our hearts.