

Born Again – Reoriented
March 8, 2020 Lent II

Genesis 12: 1-9

John 3: 1-16

Russell Mitchell-Walker

Many years ago, when I was still in University, the Billy Graham Crusade was coming to Calgary and our congregation was one of many supporting it. I attended a youth rally leading up to the main crusade. During this rally there was a prayer time, and during this prayer, the worship leader listed a number of things we might have been feeling or thinking about with regard to our faith journey. I can't remember any of these things now, but I do remember that they were things I thought would apply to everyone – things we would need to do to improve our faith and walk with God. We were asked to raise our hands if we felt they applied to us and I thought everyone would have their hands up. At the end of the prayer, all those who raised their hands were asked to go into a room off to the side of the sanctuary. So off I went, and we all prayed with someone because it turned out that we had indicated we needed to make a commitment to Christ! I was surprised, but rededicated my faith and received a card with a date indicating when I had been 'born again'!

This was my experience of being 'born again'. I felt manipulated by the way this happened, because I was a Christian, although my understanding of being Christian didn't seem to match up with theirs. I remember thinking: everyone else in that worship room that didn't put up their hand were not being honest with themselves. That was my judgement at the time of that experience. While I felt manipulated, I also took the experience as an opportunity to rededicate my faith in Christ. It was a learning that has stayed with me, and made me sceptical and cautious about the language and experience of being 'born again' as a one-time experience.

Our gospel reading from John is the passage where some within our Christian tradition focus regarding the need to be 'born again'. As always with scripture it is important to look at the context. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, one of the religious authorities who work to ensure that the religious laws are understood and upheld. He is part of an educated elite, and may be feeling a little disillusioned with his colleagues and intrigued by Jesus' message. He comes in the dark of

night to see Jesus, probably because he is taking a risk as a Pharisee, to even come and talk to Jesus. This is in contrast to Jesus who always teaches in the light of day. After Nicodemus affirms that Jesus must have the presence of God with him to do the things he's done, Jesus begins the conversation, stating that Nicodemus (and he is also implying all the Pharisees) must be born anew or born of the Spirit. The word used here can actually mean both being born again and born from above. Jesus is challenging Nicodemus that he needs to take a completely different approach to faith. He needs a new kind of seeing and knowing - one that is guided by and filled with the Spirit, rather than focused on the law.

Inherent in Nicodemus' approach to Jesus, is a question about salvation – what must I do to receive eternal life? It is interesting to note that there are many times in the gospels where Jesus talks about salvation, he is asked who is the greatest, or what is needed to have eternal life or enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Each response of Jesus is different, depending on who is asking:

- When the disciples ask who is the greatest, Jesus tells them to become like children; (Matthew 18:1-5)
- When Zaccheus, a tax collector, promises Jesus that he will give half of his possessions to the poor and pay back anyone he has defrauded, Jesus declares that salvation has come to his house; (Luke 19:1-10)
- When a lawyer asks what must he do to inherit eternal life, the response is love God, self and neighbour, and when pushed about who is his neighbour, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, and Samaritans were despised and outcast by the Jewish community; (Luke 10: 25-28)
- When a wealthy man asks Jesus what must he do to have eternal life, in the end, after talking about following the greatest commandments, Jesus tells him that he must sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor and he will have treasure in heaven. He goes away sad, because he had many material goods. (Matthew 19: 16-26, 29)

Here then are many examples of different responses to living faithfully to achieve salvation. Jesus responded differently to each person, dependent on their context and experience. He often responded with suggestions for them to live in the here and now, and indicating that the Kingdom of Heaven is among us. I also think that we can affirm that other faiths also offer a path to salvation. Being born anew or born again or from above is only one of many responses Jesus gave depending on who he was speaking to.

The challenge for Nicodemus then, is to realize how following the letter of the law was ruling his life, and that he needed to let the loving Spirit of God guide his life and live life differently. Jesus is seeking to establish a relationship of love and community. The message is also one that God loves the world, all the world and Jesus did not come to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him. God is a God of love, not judgement and fear. The focus is life, the means is relationship, and the motive is love. This is the emphasis of Jesus' message in this passage.

While we do not follow the law of the Old Testament in the same way that could rule our lives and distract us from being faithful, there are other things in our lives that may create challenge to living love in community. What are the challenges in your life? How many of us are ruled by the tasks or jobs we feel we need to get done? How often do we get so caught up in all the things we need to do, that we can forget, neglect, or push down on the priority list those who are closest to us? I know that I have become more aware that this continues to happen for me and the challenges it creates. It is too easy to get caught up in the busy-ness and all the things that need to get done that I do not make the time for myself and others. This happens especially when I don't take time to be present to myself and those around me. When I am not in touch with my feelings, my body, and just keep going without taking time to reflect, breath, pray, exercise or meditate, and speak with those closest to me about what is happening for them and me. It is a change in thinking and being that is needed.

It is about a reorientation. This whole passage is about a reorientation. It is about a new way of seeing our relationship with God and the world. It is not individual, it is cosmic, it is global. For God so loved the world...God's love is for the world and all of creation, and that is how our love should be oriented, as we follow Jesus, open to the Spirit. We are a global community. How can we love as a global community? Can we embrace the diversity of humanity, the diversity of creation? As we move through this time of crisis, climate crisis, the CoVid 19 crisis, can we do so with compassion and love? What would it look like to reorient ourselves to operate out of a place of love, rather than fear or judgement? As we move toward addressing the needs of the climate to reduce our carbon emissions, may we embrace and support those in the fossil fuel industries for whom such a transition will be most difficult, including through

providing retraining. As the virus spreads, may we remember that it is a virus and not blame or reject any particular race or country.

The website Process and Faith offers this reflection on Jesus' message:

“In this passage and conversation, Jesus is demanding that one embrace an entirely different source of meaning and value and connect to a completely different source of being. What is needed is not a mere revision of priorities but the rejection of an entire mode of being in the world and the adoption of a whole new understanding of what it means to be a human being. It is not, however, material reality, flesh understood as bodily existence, that is rejected, but a way of approaching life that cannot see beyond the material world to the world of spirit that undergirds it and gives it meaning.” As we move through this time of Lent, this calls us to re-examine the values that we uphold in human society that are more harmful to ourselves or the world. What are these values for you that you could address to reorient your life to be ‘born anew’? It could be consumerism, racism, sexism and rape culture, doctrinalism, pursuit of power and money, corporate greed, the list could go on, and it will be different for each person - what we may need to consider in this time that moves us to re-orient ourselves toward a new way of being.

As we consider what it means to be born from above, may we be open to the Spirit working in and through us. May we be open to salvation being the Kingdom with us here and now. May we be open to the many paths to salvation that Jesus identifies. May we ground ourselves in God's love, be in the moment, and be attentive to those around us who need our love and attention. May we re-orient our lives, to reflect love and compassion for the world and all that is in it, as we seek to embrace the path of Jesus, as one of caring for the community.