***“Born of the Spirit”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, May 30, 2021

**Romans 8:14–17**

14For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

**John 3:1–17**

1Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” 3Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 4Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” 5Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8The 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.” 9Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

. . . 12 “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? . . .

16 “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.

17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Welcome to spring! Nature inspires us to seek renewal, to cultivate healthy habits so that we may thrive as nature is thriving. The beauty of nature can bring us joy, and there is joy in today’s scriptures.

This gospel passage is one of several places that show a Pharisee who is sincerely interested in Jesus. In this case he is shown as being interested in Jesus’ message but being a bit slow of comprehension. This is the passage where we get the phrase “born again,” although the translation used here, “born from above,” is actually more accurate. Jesus is referring to a spiritual birth, a birth from a higher source than the physical realm. John has Nicodemus completely missing this point. John does not have him being ill willed, just dense.

Spiritual birth is the theme, meaning gaining a new and spiritual motive for living. This *will* bring a complete turnaround in someone’s life, turning from a pursuit of sex, money, and power to desiring to learn wisdom, to discover God’s love, and then to do good to others. Or maybe one already has a partially spiritual motivation, and so the change is from a singular pursuit of stability, family, and comfort to the need for God, goodness, and enduring truth. In any case, it is a birth that we choose to accept; we are a partner in this birth.

Jesus says the Spirit is comparable to the wind blowing wherever it will. It is mysterious and intriguing. There is a certain freedom to it, even though we don’t lead the wind, we follow it. In the same way, we don’t *lead* the Spirit, but *follow*, but we might get a sense of freedom that can be compared with the idea of a free-blowing wind. This is a paradox of freedom. We serve and follow the Spirit, but the Spirit gives us a sense of freedom, of creativity and discovery. “So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” This is our birthright, a gift we did not know about before, but which we learn about as we accept the gift. And every day the gift grows and challenges us to grow spiritually.

The passage ends with some sayings about the saving role of the Son. He has saving power, and the key, for us, is to believe in him. He did not come to condemn, but to save. And that salvation is ours for the asking. It is a gift from God, one of many. And it is given to us right now, just as we are. We don’t have to be perfect before entering in. We are God’s children and his love for us is like a father’s love, like our love for our children.

Paul has an interesting idea, that this faith makes us “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8:17). Paul believes that suffering is inevitable, for any who believe, because of the evil power of the world. Jesus did not come to condemn, yet the world condemns him.

So faith puts us at odds with the materialistic people of the world. But be assured that following God’s will will set us on the right path through this world. We have to be willing to suffer with Jesus, knowing that we will also be glorified with him, that is, raised from the dead and transformed into his image (2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29). The Spirit testifies with our individual spirits that we are the children of God. Paul says we are adopted into freedom and not into slavery.

There is another paradox about freedom here, because we follow someone, yet our leader gives us freedom. We serve someone, but he treats us like beloved children, not like slaves. We are not wholly independent, free of Jesus’ leadership, but we take on a remarkable freedom, a freedom from fear, for instance. Our freedom involves responsibility; we have to make choices. Jesus’ image of God as our loving father is crucial, and his parable of the Prodigal Son is powerful, showing us that we are beloved children. He offers us the respect and freedom that children have in a happy household. It is not absolute freedom. It is freedom with restraints and with parental guidance.

Responsible people don’t expect absolute freedom, anyway. We expect that our freedom has to be balanced by other factors and other people. Our freedom involves some paradoxes. We are finite beings following an infinite God. We are material beings with a spiritual nature, limited, physical beings yet with an unlimited spiritual future. And we have the absolute power of choice, regarding whether to accept the offer of eternal life.

But how wonderful it is to be freed from anxiety, from a sense of aimlessness, or from fear. These are the things that afflict people who haven’t found God. They also may feel disappointment, looking around and saying “this is all there is to existence, the material things I see.” Instead, by accepting God’s gift, you can gain a sense of purpose, a confidence in the justice of God, and that sense of freedom and joy that comes when you know that your heavenly Father loves you. What does this love mean to you now in your daily living? Does it give you meaning and value? Do you believe that love will guide you through your future life? Does *that* give you confidence about life here and hereafter?

When we are “born from above,” we receive the Spirit, which leads us to eternal life. Life will have its challenges, and not every effort will be successful. In fact, there is a famous saying “Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.” I would add: some of those apparent failures are also successes. And there is a certain mystery about the spiritual life, for instance, how *belief* can have so much power. Faith is actually linked with love. If we love Jesus, we are linked with the source of Goodness and life—*eternal* life, in fact.

And so, embrace the mystery and follow the wind of the Spirit.