

“Midwife to Faith”

Date: March 7, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: John 3:1-17

Occasion: UMM Lenten Breakfast

Theme: Born again; grace; faith

Let’s talk about “being born again” this morning. In some circles of Christianity the new birth is the only thing that counts. In other circles of Christianity, people are turned off by the expression and prefer not to use it. Perhaps the phrase has been over-used or even misused; but let’s not throw the baby out with the bath water. It’s still a meaningful expression.

Some people *are* turned off by the phrase because some born-again Christians have a holier-than-thou attitude. They’ve had a life-changing experience and they want everyone else to *know* about, and to have *that same experience*, just the way it happened to them. A story:

A drunkard fell into a well one day. He lay at the bottom of the well for many hours, waiting for help. In desperation he called out to God, “God, if you get me out of here, I’ll give up the bottle and give my life to you.” In a little while a man came along and pulled him out the well.

The drunkard was so glad that he kept his promise and became a Christian. And he was a changed man; Christ changed his life. He wanted to keep his promise to the Lord, so he decided he would share the good news with other people, about how God can turn people’s lives around.

So he went out, and started to share his faith. And whenever he found someone who would listen to him, he took them to the well, threw them in, and said, “Stay there until you meet Jesus”

Well, as funny as that story might be, some born-again Christians act as if you aren’t a Christian unless you got saved just the way they did.

On the other hand, there are many Christians who are offended by the strong-arm tactics that *some* born-again Christians use. These Christians talk about God coming into their lives in a slow, evolving way. They say you don't always have to have a dramatic turn-around in your life, that God can change a life, mold a life, over an entire life-time.

I find myself in the second camp. But here's the thing we don't want to overlook. At some point in everyone's life we must make a decision, that we are either FOR this man Jesus Christ. Or else, we really don't want to be bothered by him.

We're either going to let him come into our hearts and guide the way we live. Or else we're simply going to be curious bystanders who look back at Jesus and say, "Wasn't he an interesting person in history?" The thing is, at some point in everyone's life, we need to take the leap of faith, the leap that takes us from the edge of merely being interested in Jesus, and plunges us into a life of total commitment to Him.

When Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be born again, Nicodemus was not really so slow of mind to think he could actually climb back into his mother's womb. Nick's problem was that he *did* understand what Jesus was saying; he just didn't know how to do it.

Here was a man who had gone to church, I mean synagogue, all of his life. He was one of the teachers; he knew what the law required. AND, he also knew what Jesus said was true. He just didn't know how to get to this new place that Jesus was talking about.

Nicodemus had been working hard at his religion, all of his life. And yet, he still felt empty. Here was a man who might have been a little disappointed in his religion. He had been working hard at doing all of the required things. But he didn't have the kind of relationship that Jesus had

with God; and he wanted it. Nicodemus was tired of trying to be good enough. He was so close, and yet so far away. Being a good person is not a bad thing. God wants us to be good people, right?

But no matter how good we are; no matter how many good things we've done in our lives; no matter how often we go to church, we still can't earn our way into God's heart. It's simply a gift that we accept.

You see, we are saved by grace through faith, and not by good works. That's what Nicodemus couldn't quite grasp. He was trying so hard to impress God with his goodness that he couldn't feel or experience God's grace surrounding him, loving him, transforming him.

Grace is God's work. We simply need to be open to it. When we have tried our hardest, become frustrated and given up, and then simply trust that God will make a way, well then God's love does the rest. When we surrender our hearts to Christ, our problems don't automatically go away.

But we can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God loves us. And it is God's love that transforms us. Amen? Let me tell you my story.

When I was growing up, I had a father who had high expectations of us kids. Dad was the son of an alcoholic. His dad was an abusive husband and a lousy father. My father determined to do it right and do it better. He had a lot of high expectations of his kids, especially his first-born, me.

My Dad wasn't mean or abusive, but somehow I felt like I could never do enough to please him. That shaped my view of God. I saw God as an angry judge who was just waiting for me to make mistakes, to judge me and condemn me. I grew up in the church, and the church was just one more place that had rules for being good and doing it right. I always felt like I wasn't measuring up.

When I was in seventh grade, our church had a Lay Witness Mission visit our church. A bunch of lay people came up from Atlanta, Georgia to my home church in Baltimore, MD. They were full of joy and happiness. They played guitars and seemed to find a lot of joy in their faith and religion. It wasn't tedious or strictly a set of rules. They talked about a loving God whom we could know personally.

I realized that weekend that Christ died for *my* sins, as well as for everyone else's, so that I didn't have to be perfect. Jesus took the blame for me, and the punishment I feared I deserved. I came to believe that God loves and accepts me, just the way I am.

That weekend, in the fall of 1967, I went forward to the altar and gave my life to God, praying a prayer of forgiveness and asking God to come into my life. I felt such joy and happiness, and peace.

Since that weekend, I confess that, sometimes, I still struggle with some of the same issues – worrying that I'm not good enough. But now, I have the good news of God's love to counter-balance the idea that I'm not enough. I don't have to keep struggling to prove myself. I can fall back into the arms of a loving God and just feel his love and acceptance.

Grace changes lives. God is the midwife who brings us to faith and who gives us new life. God transforms the old and makes us new. God gives the new birth, and does all of this through the grace of his Son, Jesus Christ.

As we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion this morning, come to the table grateful for what Christ has done for you. Acknowledge your need for his grace, even if you've given your life to Christ before. As we receive this sacrament of grace, know that it is God who gives the new birth, and all of this is a free gift. Amen? Amen!