### “Born from Above” Steve Finlan for The First Church, May 26, 2024

**Romans 8:12–16**

12So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— 13for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 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.

**John 3:1–8**

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.”

Good morning. Welcome to The First Church. We welcome all of you here and invite you to join us for coffee hour after church.

Faith and trust are our two main themes today. Let’s look at the gospel reading about Nicodemus. John tells us he is a leader among the Jews, and you can tell by the story he shares with us that Nicodemus has joined in a very thoughtful discussion. Even though he is called a leader and he recognizes Jesus’ divine nature, Nicodemus is portrayed as being a bit clueless. I’m sure we all know someone who just takes things too literally, and seems to miss the point of a metaphor. But we can picture him as groping for understanding, and probably achieving it. His mind needed to stretch, to be flexible enough so as to grasp the new-birth image as a symbol for spiritual renewal and transformation.

We see Jesus saying that one must be “born from above.” This was traditionally translated “born again,” which is also a legitimate translation choice, although “born from above” is a bit more accurate. There the word is *anōthen*, and *anō* means “upwards” or “above.” The metaphor really means being *spiritually* reborn, with a new and spiritual motivation, that is, a motivation “from above.” Even though God is all around us, we naturally tend to think of God and Spirit as above us. The Spirit given on Pentecost has the power to motivate us to live spiritually. Our internal guide is always available to lead us on to greater spiritual understanding.

Let’s listen to Jesus’ words as he says “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” (3:8). He is telling us something about the creative uncertainty of living with full trust and faith leading the way. When we trust our new life to God’s care, we don’t always know where God will lead us. We have to accept the fact that our mind cannot control the Spirit. We have to trust and be ready to walk in new pathways.

When we look at Paul’s letter to the Romans, we see some similar points being made. The Spirit helps us live with a new motivation: living as children of God, and not living out of fear but from confidence and trust in our Father, who loves us. We can cry out “Abba, Father!” as though we were Aramaic-speakers, like many of the early Christians, for God is Father of all of us on earth.

Jesus and the Father sent the Advocate on Pentecost, the Spirit of Truth, to guide us into all Truth. We can have faith that even if we do not fully understand God’s plan, we will grow in understanding. Spiritual insight can happen all of a sudden—the *Ah-Ha!* Moment—or more gradually, as it may have happened for Nicodemus. I am sure in his quiet moments, when he had time to reflect, he would have said, “Oh! I see! I get it now!”

Now, even before Pentecost, there was a spirit within people. This is sometimes called natural religion or natural law: the idea that there is a voice of divinity, a gift of God, within everyone. This is different from *revealed* religion, which means a message from God coming from outside of oneself. The Bible supports both natural religion and revealed religion. In Job we read “it is a spirit in a mortal, the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding” (32:8). In Proverbs we read “the human spirit is the lamp of the Lord” (Prov 20:27).

This idea of an inner spirit is natural religion. The New Testament puts more emphasis on revealed religion, the truth embodied in the life and person of Jesus, who said “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). That is revealed religion, some truth coming from outside of ourselves. Paul combines the two in this Romans passage. He is saying that *the* Spirit poured out on Pentecost affirms what our individual spirits were already saying (8:16), at least if we seek to be led by the Spirit of God (8:14). Natural religion and revealed religion agree on this point. Spirit echoes spirit. The Pentecost Spirit of Truth “bear[s] witness with our spirit”—that is, our individual spirits—“that we are children of God” (8:16).

Paul emphasizes that the Pentecost-given Spirit makes us free, does not hand us over to slavery. He is not talking about the social status of slavery, but of liberation from slavery to the flesh, from just living day to day based on animal needs. He is saying that the Spirit given on Pentecost makes us liberated children of God with an eternal destiny. We no longer need to focus on material existence, but we should focus on our spiritual life. It is essential to make this transition from flesh-living to Spirit-living. Paul says this transforms us into “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29). Being a child of Abraham is a spiritual, not a genetic, fact. It means living by faith (Gal 3:7), being blessed by God (3:9), and receiving the Spirit (3:14).

So, what Paul refers to as being Abraham’s offspring, Jesus refers to as being born from above or born from the Spirit (John 3:6). It means allowing the Spirit to direct your living, to guide you into the path of never-ending growth. This Spirit will never force you to do something; its method is to offer light upon your spiritual path, be a guide and support.

Let’s be honest: spiritual living can be very counter-intuitive for us. We are more used to the down-to-earth, competitive, grimy, tiresome world into which we were born. We’re more used to struggling to get by or to get ahead in society somehow. It takes so much of our time. This idea of living for truth and love are very counter-intuitive to the material life we’re used to. But eventually this material life will finish and we will carry with us only the eternal treasures built upon faith and trust in God.

We have to discover a different, unseen side of ourselves, and have faith that there is also a different side to the people around us, even if we’re used to seeing their quirky, grumpy, or competitive side all the time. Living the spiritual life means believing, trusting that there is spiritual potential in all these people, as well as in ourselves. We can’t judge books by their covers!

Jesus’ divine nature was able to bring out the spiritual potential in some people. They would say things like “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24), or “Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much” (Luke 19:8).

We won’t be as compelling as Jesus was, but it is possible that we can draw out the spiritual inclinations of others. Do you have a friend or relative who claims not to have much faith, but who admires you for *your* faith? That person probably has a little more faith than he or she is willing to admit. People are funny, that way.

There is a man who doesn’t give his first name, who had an alcoholic father and became an alcoholic himself, although he wouldn’t admit it for a long time. Finally he admitted it and went to AA groups, but he still didn’t understand the basic spiritual principles, he later said. He said it was when working the Tenth Step that he finally got it.

The Tenth Step says “continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.” He started facing what it was inside himself that was making him angry. It didn’t disappear when he faced it, but it stopped running his life. He stopped flying off the handle.

He said “To practice the principles in all my affairs was difficult until I knew what they were . . . unselfishness, understanding, humility, kindness, love, acceptance, hope, integrity, tolerance, patience.” Now he believes everything that has happened to him has happened for a reason. It’s as though he were serving an apprenticeship. He writes “God has often worked in my life when I could not work in my own life” (https:// aa.org.au/new-to-aa/personal-stories/personal-stories-a-long-road-to-a-life-of-quality/). The Spirit, and the program, turned his life around.

Let the Spirit turn *your* life around. It may mean that you rework your set patterns, break out of the mold and work a new program of some kind, be disciplined and highly focused, and keep trying after every setback. But the Spirit is always there to help you. *Trust,* have faith, and let the Spirit move you.