

Trinity Sunday B

John 3:1-17

"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. Jn 3:16 that famous or infamous Gospel passage. We see it everywhere. It has become the banner of those "born again" Christians. We've see the signs held up by spectators at every sports arena, seen it written on faces. I seem to remember, I think a WWE Wrestler even added it to his name a few years back -was it Austin 3:16? And you can see it on almost every stretch of road in Virginia posted in front of someone's house or on a billboard. Just down the road on 340 someone wrote John 3:16 on a mailbox sign and at the bottom it simply says "amen." I think as Episcopalians we feel a little wary when we see those signs or hear someone tell us "you must be born again". That type of religious requirement just isn't "us", is it?

But this account Of Nicodemus' night time visit to Jesus should help remind us just what Jesus meant by saying one must be "born again." The Greek phrase translated "born from above" also can be translated "born again". Translators have struggled with whether to translate it as "born from above" or "born again", but it is clear that the author of John intends both meanings. To be born again is also to be born from above, to be born of the Spirit. It requires dying to old ways of being and being born into a new identity-an identity in the Spirit, in Christ, in God.

Let's remember it is signs that have brought Nicodemus to Jesus. He wants to know more about Jesus and his purpose after seeing Jesus perform things he cannot explain away. Then in six verses the word "born" is used eight times. Jesus knew Spiritual Birth is a painful and messy process. To be a newborn is to be in a place of complete dependence, of complete unknowing.

So, this is in essence the story of Nicodemus' spiritual formation. An invitation from Jesus to see, to understand a new way. And Jesus does offer Nicodemus a new sign- the entrance to the Kingdom of God is in the shape of Jesus hanging on the cross.

I think we must as individuals and as a congregation take back the true meaning of this word "born again". We must not run away from using it and leaving it only to the pentecostals and baptists. Peter Gomes, who was a professor of Christian Morals at Harvard's Divinity School, said "The one who is born again doesn't all of a sudden get turned into a super Christian. To be born again is to enter afresh into the process of spiritual growth. It is to wipe the slate clean. It is to cancel your old mortgage and start again."

This last week seemed to be one continuous conversation with many different people about what all this upheaval, physically, politically, and religiously in our world means. Is it a sign of the end times?

I have also been in dialogue with many church leaders who are asking, almost as if they too are under cover of darkness.. What if the decline in numbers and the decline of morals in society continue? How are we going to survive? And if we do survive what will we be after our transition? What will we look like 3, 5, 10 years from now?

The process of creating a new life, born of Spirit and faith is not an easy one. But as a denomination struggling to increase

parishioners and to be relevant in this crazy world it is a process we must undergo and endure.

The whole process of being born again is about dying to self and being transformed into your True self. Being born again involves creating an identity centered in God, Christ and the Spirit. Now this experience can be sudden and dramatic (God Smacked). But for most individuals and congregations it is a more gradual and incremental process. And I pray that like Nicodemus we begin to ask questions about ourselves and understand signs that lead to re-birth.

The Judaism of Nicodemus' traditions observed 613 laws and commandments. I think that he could not help but be amazed at the simplicity of Jesus' teaching. But he had curiosity, and a desire to know more about God and an openness to be changed, not all of a sudden, by his belief in Jesus. Remember, we are

told, He later carried a hundred pounds of oil and spices to anoint Jesus' body and helped Joseph of Arimathea hoist Jesus' body off the cross.

Sometimes I think that our Churches, even though we aren't fundamentalists or evangelicals we still want a kind of rule book (well we do have our beloved the Book of Common Prayer), It's natural for us to want rules in the Church; steps to follow that will give us more people, more programs and insurance that we will be here 3, 5, 10 years from now.

The problem is that personal, congregational and worldly life is messy, the challenges are complex, issues are not black or white and following Jesus is more a matter of following a way of life, a way of being, than following a set of rules.

I think we all realize that we must face the challenges. In order to survive we must birth something fresh and new out darkness into the light. But, being born from above, to allow ourselves to become what God wants us to be is going to be hard.

It is going to mean letting go of the past, it means learning new ways of speaking, listening and behaving. It means being open and willing to be moved by the Spiritual winds that blow.

And the most important part of all this transforming faithfully and facing the challenges of our day is- it means wanting and working to bring others here into our rebirthing so they too can see clearly the God given signs of spiritual growth at Emmanuel and experience for themselves the truth of Jesus' promise to Nicodemus that " God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may be born into eternal life".

Amen.