

It's a New Day
John 3:1-17
May 27, 2018 – Trinity Sunday

Last week we celebrated Pentecost. Last week we celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and what has been called “the birthday of the Christian church.” Indeed, at Pentecost, the disciples were so empowered by the Holy Spirit that they were able to go forth *to all nations* proclaiming the Good News of God’s amazing love as expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I’ve stated many times before that the Holy Spirit was not born on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit always existed as a manifestation of the divine; and the Holy Spirit always will exist. The Holy Spirit was present at creation, moving across the waters. The Holy Spirit was present in that upper room on Easter Sunday, when Jesus breathed upon the disciples. And so, today, on this Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost, we celebrate our one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit.

And with that eternal presence of the Holy Spirit in mind, we back up in the Gospel story to a time before the Pentecost, to a time before the ascension, even to a time before the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus was walking the earth, teaching and healing, working miracles; when a Jewish leader came to him at night. Scholars have made a lot of the fact that it was night. Some have stated that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, did not want to be seen speaking with the renegade, Jesus. Others take a more symbolic view, and suggest that Nicodemus was truly “in the dark” about Jesus true identity, and more importantly about his spiritual birth.

But for purposes of this sermon, I’d like to set Nicodemus aside and concentrate on the teachings of Jesus: “One must be born from above... No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of Spirit is spirit.”

Last week, on Pentecost, I spoke of the Holy Spirit, the *Paraclete* in Greek, as our “companion,” the very presence of God walking beside us to guide us, to strengthen us, and to lead us. Now, at the risk of being just slightly contrary to the Gospel of John, I’m going to get Methodist. I’m going to get Wesleyan, and I’m going to tell you that Spirit, the “companion” has always been beside you. The companion has been beside you from the day you were born of flesh. And John Wesley called that presence, prevenient grace. We discussed prevenient grace in our New Member Class a couple weeks ago, but I promised those folks that there would be no test, so I won’t put them on the spot. Simply put, grace is God’s love for God’s people - all God’s people, every person on this planet. And the word “prevenient” is a nice 18th century, old-English word that means “that which comes before.” Thus, prevenient grace is “grace that comes before.” Before what? Before we even know it. Prevenient grace is the love that God has for a person even before they are aware of it. Indeed, God is walking beside a person even

before they are aware of it. Every person has a divine companion, whether they are aware of it or not, whether they recognize it, or even if they deny it. God is with them. God is with all of us. That's prevenient grace.

So what does it mean to be "born again" or to be "born from above" or to be "born by water and Spirit"? Simply put, it means to become aware of it, to become aware of our companion, to become aware of God's great love for us. John Wesley would call this justification, or justifying grace. It's the point that we, through faith, realize how much God loves each and every one of us. As the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, "We are justified [we are made right] by our faith." But it doesn't stop there; because, if we truly have faith, if we experience the justifying grace, we come to realize that we have a companion in the Holy Spirit or what I might call the Spirit of the Risen Christ. I tell you, if we are "born again" our lives will be different.

Now, at this point, I want to take a moment to recognize that there are those folks that call themselves "born again Christians." I'm not always sure what they mean by that, because it seems to me that many of these so called "born agains" tend to be fairly exclusionary in their "born again" groups. They will say that one cannot be "born again" if they don't interpret the Bible in a certain usually quite literal way. They will say that one cannot be "born again" if they don't hold to a very specific doctrine of their specific brand of Christianity. Because of the nature of individuals claiming the name "born again," I generally do not refer to myself as a "born again" Christian; but, if you ask me if I have been born again of the Spirit, I will tell you "Yes." Yes, because I have personally experienced God's Amazing Grace in my life; yes, because I have welcomed Christ into my life; yes, because I try to recognize, accept and follow the guidance of the companion who is always walking with me. (Notice, I said "try." I'll be the first to admit my human failings.)

Some people relate "being born of water and Spirit" as a call to Christian baptism. To that, I say "Yes and No." Yes, I believe baptism is hugely important; and yes, I believe that through baptism and through the remembrance of our baptism we experience the love of God. But, you and I both know people who have been baptized who, to put it bluntly, don't have a spiritual bone in their bodies. So, yes, baptism is important, and I encourage all Christians of all ages to be baptized; but I also believe baptism is only the beginning of our walk with Christ; and, in some cases, it even comes part way through our journey.

And so, we experience God's grace; we are justified, made right by God's grace; we truly experience, accept, and welcome the companion, the Spirit of the Living God that walks with us. Yes, we are born again; and if that's really true our lives will be different. And Wesley called that difference sanctification or sanctifying grace. Sanctifying – to be made holy, to be set apart. In true Methodist fashion, one of the ways we experience sanctifying grace, one of the ways we experience God's love is by mission work, by serving God and the people of God. Another way is by worship, by praising God, and by celebrating the sacraments. In

short, we experience sanctifying grace by loving God and loving all our neighbors in our thoughts, in our words, and in our deeds.

Still, being born again by the Spirit is not just about what we do. It's about who we are. And so, I return to my favorite Hebrew word, *Shalom*, and my favorite Greek word, *Agape*. *Agape* is the title of our Church's newsletter. Its subtitle is "Greek for Love without Limits." I like that definition. *Agape* - love God, love your neighbor, and love yourself without limits. And *shalom* – yes it means peace; but it means much more than an absence of war or violence. *Shalom* also means an inner peace, a fullness, a wholeness. It's a wonderful word. And so I submit, if you are born of the Holy Spirit, you will live, or at least you will strive to live a life of *agape* and *shalom*.

Most of you are aware that a group of sixteen of us are meeting every week in a group to practice "The Daniel Plan." The Daniel Plan is all about leading a full, healthy life. The Daniel Plan is about loving ourselves so we can better love others; and it focuses on five essentials: Faith, Food, Fitness, Focus, and Friends – five essentials to a healthy life. The Daniel Plan involves life-style changes. For some they are minor and for others, they are fairly major; but they all lead to a fuller life. And so, in a way, some of the participants of The Daniel Plan have experienced rebirth by the Spirit. It's a new day. I encourage you to speak with any of us. We won't share what others have shared within our group setting, but we will certainly share our personal experiences and the things we have learned.

There will be opportunities in the future for others to join The Daniel Plan, but whether you do or not, I ask you, "Do you welcome the companionship of the Holy Spirit? Will you let the Spirit be your guide? Will you draw your strength from the Spirit's presence? Will you find your peace in the companionship of the Spirit? Will you put your faith in the Spirit of the Living God? Will you be born again but water and the Spirit?"

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,
Give us such strength and courage,
that we may be born anew,
recognizing your presence, your constant companionship
in our lives.
Lead us and guide us,
that we may follow wherever you lead.
In your holy name we pray.
Amen.

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