

“Born Again or Born from Above, Which is It? Oh, It’s Both!”

The Rev. Gary Coffey, Grace Episcopal Church, Asheville 3/16/14

I would imagine that a child in the hood who carries a basketball around with him for his entire childhood and adolescence is more likely to make it to the NBA. Why? Because as he walks up the street, he is dribbling a basketball. At every opportunity, he is shooting hoops with his friends. Even as he sits in class, he feels the basketball bulging through his backpack against his leg. The basketball is his constant companion. The kid eats, drinks, breathes and sleeps with his basketball. And most importantly, perhaps, is that the young man doesn’t spend all this time with his basketball out of obligation or because someone is telling him to, but because of his love for the game.

We don’t know when it happened, but at some point, this kid’s life became oriented to and consumed by basketball. He was, one might say, converted from whatever he previously thought was the most important thing in life to believing that for him, basketball is the most important thing. After that, he pursues the sport with a singlemindedness which is admirable, whether or not he ever plays for the Lakers or the Knicks.

It was this kid’s conversion to making basketball the number one thing in his life that reminded me of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus the Pharisee.

Like Saul the Pharisee who later became known as St. Paul, the Apostle, Nicodemus had been to seminary. He had been taught all the stuff about God so much so that he was, we are told, “a leader of the Jews”. But despite his theological degrees and his success in the ministry, Nicodemus had no doubt seen something in Jesus that Nicodemus was lacking.

So, one evening, after it was dark, Nicodemus slipped over to where Jesus was staying to find out what made Jesus tick.

Some of you will remember the book *I’m Okay You’re Okay*. The premise of that book was that we relate to one another from sometimes equal and sometimes unequal levels. For example, two people who are conversing on the same level would be called an Adult-Adult relationship. An example of an unequal relationship would be relating as Parent-Child or Child-Parent. Of course, there would be an obvious power differential between a Parent-Child interaction. I thought of this when Nicodemus, a learned religious leader, addressed Jesus as Rabbi. In doing so, Nicodemus set up that power differential between Jesus and Himself as Teacher-Student, didn’t he? It was a very unusual move for a learned Pharisee to do. What it meant was that Nicodemus had come to learn something from Jesus, didn’t it?

Nicodemus, a learned Pharisee, coming to learn something from Jesus, a Galilean peasant teacher, would be like an accomplished actor like Tom Hanks or Anthony Hopkins coming to a young relatively inexperienced actor like Justin Bieber or Miley Cyrus for acting advice.

Nicodemus began the Rabbinical sparring with Jesus by saying, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these things that you do apart from the presence of God.”

Jesus answered, “No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Nicodemus, obviously confused, said, “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb to be born?”

Now the reason that Nicodemus was confused is that the word that Jesus used to describe this additional birth, “another” can mean “again” or “from above”. Nicodemus had obviously thought that Jesus used the word meaning to be born “again” rather than being born “from above”.

Jesus clarified what he meant by saying that one must be born of water and of the Spirit, of water referring to natural birth, and born from above referring to spiritual birth, or being born from above.

Jesus further clarified what he meant by saying “That which is born of flesh is flesh and that which is born of Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.”

Now, to further complicate matters, if we think about it, we can use both “born from above” and “born again” to refer to the spiritual birth and as you well know people do use them synonymously in our day and time.

Jesus went on to talk about the Holy Spirit, how like the wind, the Spirit blows wherever it chooses and is not controlled by us, but by God. So it is, Jesus says, with everyone who is born of the Spirit. One who is born of the Spirit, like the Spirit, is therefore is directed by God.

Now the big question all of this raises is, “How is one “born from above”? What does this spiritual birth actually mean?

Well, it seems to have something to do with yielding one's life to God.

Going back for a moment to the boy with the basketball, at some point, either all at once, or very gradually, this kid yielded to the idea that he wanted to become a basketball player. Others may have influenced him to do this, but when it came down to it, it was he who made the decision and yielded himself to the process of becoming a basketball player which involved a total commitment to the sport.

I suspect that there is a similar process in play to becoming born from above. It involves coming to a place in our lives where we want to say yes to God's involvement in our lives. When I was thinking about this this week, I ran across the caption to our Lenten calendar for this year that spells it out pretty well. It reads,

"We are called to be open to conversion, to that deep transformation that can only be accomplished by the activity of the living God moving and dwelling within us, working silently, surely, secretly to make us new."

Let me read it for us again.

It occurs to me that the difference between the boy becoming a great basketball player and you and I becoming spiritual people is that to a large extent the it is up to the boy to make himself into a great basketball player whereas it is up to God to develop us into more spiritual people.

Like a sail on a boat, you and I can do nothing spiritually on our own...we can do no thing without the wind of the Holy Spirit filling us and transforming us little by little into the likeness of Christ.

In closing, let's try to answer the question,

“According to Jesus, how DOES one become born from above?”

Very quickly, it seems that our spiritual birth is a process and that it involves three things: repentance, faith and offering ourselves to God.

1. Repentance. The O.T. prophets talked about it. John the Baptist talked about it. Jesus talked about it. And we as Christians have taught repentance ever since. It involves turning from the world's way to God's way. It happens when we decide we are going to follow Jesus in our lives.
2. Faith. A better word for faith is trust. Faith involves trusting God no matter what may happen to us, knowing that God holds us tightly and will never let us go.
3. Giving ourselves to God. Actually, it is giving ourselves BACK to the God who designed and created us in the first place. It is signified so well in the words of this song that we have sung with the children here at Grace.

I'm yours, Lord, everything I've got. (clap, clap)

Everything I am and everything I'm not. (clap, clap)

I'm yours, Lord. Try me now and see. (clap clap)

See that I can be completely yours.

Let us pray,

Lord, as we think about being born from above and how it involves repentance, trust and giving ourselves to you, it occurs to us that this is not a one shot deal, but a lifelong process. Continue to birth us spiritually O Lord, that we might be transformed into your likeness and be used by Holy Spirit to bring the world to you. AMEN.