

Born Again, Again

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Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” John 3:3

People are so funny. If I began to describe myself as a born-again Christian, some of you might look at me a little strangely. Others of you would start to look—either for a different church or a different pastor.

Thing is, is there any such thing as a Christian who’s *not* born again? Nobody is born a Christian. It’s not in our genes, like our eye color, or whatever our hair color used to be. There’s nothing automatic about it. At some point in your life you become a follower of Christ, or you don’t.

In that way, every one of us is a convert to Christianity. In that way, at some point, every one of us became reborn. We got a new name. We got a new identity. We got a new point of reference. All of them wrapped up in the One we call Christ.

I was born again for the first time in a church in Freeport, Long Island. I was a couple of months old at the time. I don’t remember it--I’m sure the water was cold and the process elusive to me.

I’ve never been back inside that sanctuary. The minister’s wife kept the little kids next door at the parsonage; people said it was an excuse to avoid sitting through her husband’s sermons. Soon afterwards my mom got a singing job at a different church, and that was that.

I would love to go back sometime and see if anything about the place comes back to me, improbable as that would be.

I would love to go back there and see if I could experience anything of my first spiritual rebirth. But the truth is, I’ve been born again a lot since then.

I was born again, again, one day in the side yard of my house when, for no reason, I suddenly knew that God knew me and cared about me.

I was born again, again, at the home of a schoolmate, explaining to him about Jesus, and how God knew him and cared about him.

I was born again, again, one day at church when I cut Sunday school and listened instead to an older friend explain why, as a Christian, he couldn’t sign up for the draft and participate in the killing of people he didn’t know.

I was born again, again, one day in an empty high school locker room, late for gym, late for life, when God whispered to me and called me by name.

I was born again, again, one day after youth group, sitting backstage with a wooden cross in my lap. A friend came and asked why I was crying, and I said I was thinking about what Jesus had done for me. And he said, “No, *really*.”

I was born again, again, one day in South Africa, when a priest friend there told me I could follow my heart into the ministry without leaving behind a mind that was committed to justice.

I was born again, again one day here in the SPSA chapel, when a prayer by Pat Rothrock and a hymn played by Frank dealt me a one-two spiritual punch.

I was born again, again after a couple of deaths in a row left me feeling paralyzed.

I’ve been born again more times than I could count. In fact, when I’m in a place of being spiritually open enough and vulnerable enough, I get born again every day. I sometimes wonder how I could live my life without being blessed with those moments of spiritual rebirth.

I would love for reasons personal and practical, to not describe myself in public, as a born-again Christian. Trouble is, it’s true. As I confided in someone once, I’ve been born again so often, I could be my own obstetrician.

So when I read this passage about Jesus telling Nicodemus he needs to be born all over again, I’m not surprised.

There is a lot here that feels familiar. Let’s look at the story for a minute.

First of all, notice that Nicodemus has come to Jesus by night. There are a couple of reasons why the Gospel of John includes that little detail, I think.

First of all, it shows that Nicodemus, a member of the Pharisee party, is at least embarrassed about coming to Jesus, and possibly he’s afraid. He is described by John as a “Leader of the Jews” which really translates as someone connected to the religious superstructure of the day. He’s public. He’s vulnerable to criticism.

Second, John often uses the image of night to indicate distance from God. To indicate the absence of God. Nicodemus is coming by night, because he’s a spiritual leader who is supposed to have it all together and maybe doesn’t. Nicodemus is coming by night because he is looking for something he doesn’t quite have.

He tells Jesus that he knows no one can do the things Jesus does “apart from the presence of God.” But it seems to me that Nicodemus is feeling very much apart from the presence of God.

Pharisees were proto-rabbis, the teachers of Torah. With all the religious training that went into being a Pharisee, Nicodemus really should have had it together. With the elaborate religious practices of his daily life, Nicodemus could have been a spiritual giant, I suppose.

But instead, he’s vulnerable. Instead, he’s searching. And that’s a good thing.

At last Wednesday’s vespers service, Julia preached on the first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” What a powerful thing, to know you are poor in spirit. What a powerful thing, to know you are spiritually needy. Needing God.

Nicodemus finds himself in that situation. Poor in spirit. Vulnerable. Empty. Hungry. Thirsty. Searching for something. And he finds Jesus.

I’m not sure what Nicodemus thought he’d get from Jesus, but in truth he gets nothing; nothing he might expect. He explains to Jesus that the things Jesus does makes it seem like Jesus is living in the presence of God. And what does Jesus say? No one can see the kingdom of God without being “born again”. You can’t even see the place God lives, the places God is present, unless you can be “born again”.

I’ve been using the traditional translation here, born again. But that’s a way of translating this part of scripture that is both oversimplified and not quite accurate.

John’s Gospel has the Greek words *gennathae anothen* here. It doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue. And it’s an ambiguous expression, maybe purposely ambiguous. *Gennathae* means born or conceived or started. Think of our word “genesis”, from a related Greek word. Genesis, beginning, start. *Anothen* can mean again. Or it can mean from above. Later, during the crucifixion, we read that the temple curtain is torn *anothen*—from above, from top to bottom.

Sorry for the Greek lesson, but it’s important, especially considering how central this concept has become to many Christians, this concept of being *gennathae anothen*. Of being a *gennathae anothen* Christian. So we who take the Christian message seriously ought to wrestle with it a little.

Gennathae anothen can mean “born again” yes, that’s an acceptable translation. That’s the way Nicodemus hears it, but it’s evidently not exactly what Jesus intended. Nicodemus says to Jesus, “Wait, how can anyone be born after having grown old—can

someone enter a second time into a mother's womb?" He finds this idea absurd and disturbing, and it is!

So Jesus keeps trying to explain what he means, finally giving up in frustration, saying to Nicodemus, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

But don't feel bad for Nicodemus. It's 2000 years later, and you and I still have a hard time understanding these things. And we're not alone. But understanding these things is still important. Still essential to anyone who wants a glimpse of the God's kingdom. Still essential to any of us who would choose not to live, in Nicodemus' words, "apart from the presence of God."

Gennathae anothēn can mean "born again." It can also mean "born from above." It could just as easily mean conceived again, conceived from above, conceived from top to bottom. Restarted. Rebooted.

I think the best way of expressing *gennathae anothēn* in English would be something like, "radically reconceived."
Reconceived from top to bottom.

If you are at school and your professor or teacher tells you your paper needs to be reconceived, she's not saying you forgot to run the spell-check, right?

At work, when your boss tells you a project you're working on needs to be radically reconceived, he's not talking tinkering, right?

It's got to be redone. Restarted. Reworked. Re-thought. Reborn from top to bottom. Maybe they're suggested that what you really need to do is toss it out and start it over. Maybe they are saying, yes, you could cut and paste, come up with a new opening paragraph, rearrange the powerpoint slides, but you might find it just as easy to start over.

That's what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus. And it's not a simple thing. It's not an easy thing.

That's what Jesus is saying to us, as well.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus, you must be reconceived from top to bottom.

And Jesus goes farther. He tells Nicodemus, you need to be born of water and of spirit. Water and wind, you could say. Nicodemus you need to be washed clean and blown about.

And, dear Nicodemus, you need to be radically, radically reconceived.

So was Nicodemus radically reconceived following his nighttime encounter with Jesus?

Hard to say. There are two more glimpses of Nicodemus in John's gospel.

In chapter 7, we see him sticking up for Jesus at a meeting of his fellow Pharisees. No longer at night. No longer afraid of his faith.

And at the end of John's gospel, even after the crucifixion, when things are hottest, most dangerous, we see Nicodemus helping Joseph of Arimathea with the body of Jesus. Together they lower the bloody, broken body from the cross. Together they care for their teacher. Together they find a place to bury this man they love.

Friends, there are some days I know I need to be *gennathae another*. Not just born again, again. I need to be rebooted, restarted. I need to be radically reconceived.

And friends, most of us, we need to be *gennathae another*. We need to be radically reconceived.

And we are at a point in time when our country needs, desperately needs, to be radically reconceived. It's not just a matter of electing one person or the other person to the presidency. Maybe that's a start. But the old patterns of chauvinism and triumphalism and shallow patriotism are not right for our times, and the truth is, they never were.

We don't need "change." We need what Lincoln wasn't too shy to call a new birth, a "new birth of freedom." We need what Jesus would call *gennathae another*. We need to be radically reconceived, to be taken back to our radical roots when equality mattered, when fairness mattered, when justice mattered, when truth-telling mattered. We need to go back to our radical roots when foreign policy was a thing to be practiced in humility, and occasional mutuality.

And we are at a point in time when our church, also, needs to be radically reconceived. I won't speak for all churches, but I'll tell you that the United Methodist Church needs to be radically reconceived, needs to be reborn of water and spirit, needs to be brought back to life spiritually. In a way that Jesus would recognize. In a way that those wacky Wesleys would recognize.

So my prayer today, and I'll say it and sit down, my prayer is the words of Charles Wesley, written a decade after he himself was born again, again. Written as a parody of an overly-patriotic John Dryden poem ("Fairest Isle, all isles excelling") and rendered "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." Written at a time when what Charles Wesley wished for more than life was that *his* church—the Anglican church, *his* country--England, and most passionately of all, himself, could be radically reconceived in the

power of the spirit of Christ, a spirit he renamed, and named over and over again, simply, "Love."

Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven, come down to earth! Fix in us your humble dwelling, your place of presence. Jesus, Love, you *are* compassion. Jesus, Love, you are love without borders. Come to us with your power to radically-reconceive us. And come not to some benighted few, but enter every trembling, vulnerable, hungry, thirsty, searching, open heart.

Amen.