

“God’s Presence is to be Shared, not Stored”

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury*

May 31, 2015

Birthday Sunday – Second Sunday of Pentecost

Readings: Psalm 29 John 3:1-17

It is one of the most controversial passages in the Bible. Some see it as the essence of what Jesus is about, and what He taught. It provides, such people would claim, the litmus test for who is to be seen as a true Christian.

I have been in circles where the first question is not “Are you a Christian?” or “Do you follow the ways of Jesus Christ?” or even more generally “Do you believe in God?” or simply “Do you think there is a God?” but rather the introductory question is “Are you born again?”

For years, as a good United Church member and later minister, I avoided the question, or offered a dismissive answer, but now I am much more comfortable offering (without hesitation), when asked the question, “Are you born again?” the clear response: “Yes, I am.”

Now do I really believe that? Well, to be true, it is not so much that I may agree with what some people understand by that phrase, but I am confident that there is nothing to shirk or fear by the question “Are you born again?”

Of course the very question is wrong-headed, because it is not about being born again as much as it is a need to understand what Jesus said in this passage, that we must be born of water and the spirit – or elsewhere where he states that “we must be born from above.”

In Greek, the word is ambiguous, it can mean “born anew,” or “born from above” or even “born again,” but any either case it means that life is not just a superficial reality. We need to find a deeper purpose than simply eat, sleep, and exercise.

I work with funeral directors in an educational program to train those who will be preceptors to interning students seeking to enter that profession. It is a program that includes, as any professional program should, a module on how to instill attitudes of professional understanding and action into one’s life.

Being a professional – whether a nurse or a doctor, a teacher or a researcher, an accountant or an investment advisor, a contractor or a trades person, a minister or a social worker, or countless other professions – demands a different level of self-awareness, self-understanding, and self-activity.

Jesus suggested that a sense of personal transformation applies to every life. We all need to see ourselves in a new way if we are to follow in the ways of the gospel and how God expects us to be and to do.

You see, in Jesus' understanding, "being born from above" or "being born anew" is not about something measureable as much as it is about something spiritual.

That is why he says we must live by "water and the spirit," and why we say very clearly and directly that baptism is an act that involves both "water" and the "spirit."

The Rev. Lindsay King, at age 85 still a controversial and dynamic minister of the United Church, in a recent op-ed piece offers these ideas on what Jesus talks about with Nicodemus:

"I keep thinking: when we theologians talk, write and do theology, isn't it about time that we came up with a new paradigm for doing so? One that helps us avoid thinking about 'god' anthropomorphically – the way the ancient world did, esp. the Greeks and the Romans.

"My solution? I prefer using an acronym, G-O-D, which I first coined years ago to stand for that which – from deep within the human spirit – Generates, Organizes, and Delivers (GOD) reality – much of which depends on what we will it to be, is Goodness, Optimism, and Delight."

This presence, Lindsay goes on to say, works spiritually from within and from without – it is his answer and understanding of the John passage speaking about the need for water *and* the spirit.

The Rev. Tiina Cote wrote about such experiences of spiritual rebirth in a Minute for Mission that we did not read here at St. Andrew's as it fell on the first Sunday of Advent, St. Andrew's Sunday, in 2014. (*I learned long ago that nothing should interrupt planned "St. Andrew's Day" celebrations.*) Yet this Minute for Mission deserves our attention, even if we are hearing about it some five or six months later.

Tina served as Chaplain at the University of Dodoma in Tanzania until two years ago, and wrote about the sense of people rising up in hope as the spirit guided them at that school, and she saw the presence of God moving about the students as their loud prayers were offered up in chapel each day. Yes, being born again is not divorced from our United Church experience. It is about feeling the Spirit of God moving in and through us, and celebrating that presence.

For others, the passage we read from John has a whole different focus. Many would point to 3:16 as the focus of this entire passage – a verse often seen on the side of barns or on large signs in rural Ontario. I, in no way, desire to dismiss that verse, but for me the key verse in this section is actually John 3:17, “God did not send his son in to the world to condemn the world, but in order that all may be saved through him.”

And if being born from above is not about condemnation, but about being saved and being cared for, then we must not use the words of Jesus as a venomous way to judge.

Studies in the United States, where up to 40 % of the population self-label themselves as “born again” as recently as a decade ago, show that a higher percentage of born again Christians also are judgmental of others, and hold bigoted or racially charged and dismissive views.

How is that related to the very clear edict that God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world may be saved through him?

For me, the question is not “Are you born again?” but rather “Are you ready to live by ‘water and the spirit’”? Are you able to see the ordinary, everyday realities around you as important, and are you open to the spirit blowing into your life to bring newness of hope and understanding?

God’s spiritual presence is not something we should make sure we have, and make sure that others are not about to receive it. No, the very concept of spirit is a reality that is meant to be shared.

Let us not be overwhelmed with the worry to be born again, but let us look for opportunities to be born (or to start) anew as we enter a new week, and a new month, and soon begin a new season in our journey with God.