

Hayward United Methodist Church

Pastor Samuel's Message for Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost, August 29, 2021

"Birth From Above"

Text: John 3:1-17

Gospel Reading: John 3:1-2, 5, 16-17 (NRSV)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." . . . Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." . . . For God so loved the world that he his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Prayer for Illumination (UMH 6)

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that, as the Scriptures are read and your word proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

This is an important passage in John's Gospel. Here is an individual conversation that takes place between Nicodemus and Jesus. John's Gospel seems to set the story strait at the very beginning. In order to understand who Jesus is or even to understand his teaching, one must be born of the Spirit. Otherwise people will likely misunderstand Jesus and his ministry. Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel. That means he studied the Torah. He could read and interpret the Torah. He knew what it means to follow the precepts of God. But he couldn't find the true meaning of life. He was searching for it.

There were many teachers of Israel. Nicodemus represents all teachers of Israel. With the coming of Jesus, things changed. Jesus came to offer life. That life was not found in the reading of the law. It is now found in a person. That person is none other than Jesus who is the Son of God. Nicodemus saw the signs performed

by Jesus. Now he came to believe that Jesus was sent by God. He was looking for Jesus to find the answer for his question. He was looking for Jesus to know the meaning of life.

First, Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. He comes to Jesus by the cover of darkness. He could have come to Jesus at daytime. But he doesn't want to be seen by others. Because he is the teacher of Israel. He ought to be teaching, rather than to be taught. He didn't want anyone know that he himself was in search of life. He didn't want others to know that he was lacking something which he could not find in the study of the Torah.

Nicodemus is still in darkness. He has not yet comprehended the spiritual truth. He is on a quest. But he has come to the right person. He could have gone to other teachers of Israel. Probably he did. But he was not satisfied with their answers. The way the conversation goes, the Kingdom of God and the new birth are related to one another. To see the Kingdom of God is to be born anew. Probably Nicodemus asked how he could see or enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above" (Jn 3:3). Jesus preached that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Now, the question comes: how can one see the Kingdom of God? The basic requirement to see the Kingdom of God is to be born from above.

Jesus talks about a different kind of birth here. It is not physical birth. It is spiritual birth. Of course, Nicodemus misunderstands the birth Jesus is talking about. He said, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born? (Jn 3:4). It shows that Nicodemus has not yet come to the light. He is still in darkness. He misunderstands what Jesus is talking about. But eventually he will understand fully well. He has made a right choice to come Jesus with a valid question.

Can you identify with Nicodemus? Are you in search of meaning in life? Have you tried many other means to find true meaning in life? This is the right time to come to Jesus. It is still time to come to Jesus while you are still in darkness. Nicodemus was honest. He knew that he was in search of truth. He would eventually find truth. Jesus is the truth. Jesus would take time to answer your question and show the way to new life.

Second, Jesus takes time to explain the new birth. New birth is God's gift to the world. New birth is connected to water and Spirit. Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, no can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." (Jn 3:5). Water refers to baptism here. Spirit refers to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is the beginning of new birth. In baptism we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit who will lead us into all the truth. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus in the form of a dove. From then onwards, Jesus was led by the Spirit to preach, teach, and heal. The Spirit guided Jesus to the cross and gave him guidance and strength to remain obedient to God's will until his death.

The Spirit effects the new birth which comes from above. No one knows how it all happens. Jesus compares the new birth to the wind. Jesus said, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8). New birth is a kind of experience. Sometimes it occurs at baptism and sometimes it occurs at any stage in the life of the believer. But it is only the beginning, not the end of salvation.

New birth is led by the Spirit. It means that new birth continues to produce fruit in the life of the believer. The Spirit will open the door of possibility in life. The Spirit will help the believer to practice their faith. Experience of new birth has to translated into action. Otherwise new birth will not take root in the life of the believer. New birth has to be nurtured by the Spirit in the word of God. One should take the first step to come to water to be baptized. Then God would send the Holy Spirit as a sign of new birth. One should be open to the leading of the Spirit. Each and everyday the believer should depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and demonstrate the new birth in word and action.

Third, God loves the world. Here is a single verse that most of the people are familiar with. It's John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." God loved us before we loved God. God sent God's Son while we were yet sinners. God demonstrated God's love for the world by sending Jesus to die for our sins. Through his life and death we are given eternal life. New birth Jesus offers leads to eternal life. God does not want anyone to perish. God wants everyone to have eternal life. Further God sent God's Son not to judge but to save.

New birth happens here and now because of God's love. Jesus explained the new birth to Nicodemus because he loved him. Jesus loves us all. Nicodemus vanished from the scene until we hear of him toward the end of the Gospel. But the truth about new birth remains. To see God's Kingdom or to enter God's Kingdom one should be born of water and the Spirit.

Jesus opened the door of possibility. He came to show God's love. He came to offer new birth. It is available for those who believe in God's Son. Now is the time to receive the new birth. Now is the time to choose the light. Jesus later said, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him" (Jn 3:36). Let's not postpone this offer. This offer comes from God through Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul echoes the same urgency. It is the right time to turn to God. It is the right time to accept salvation. He says, "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2). What are you waiting for? Jesus is waiting for you to come to him. Nicodemus took the first step by coming to Jesus. He found the new birth. He found the eternal life. He found the Kingdom of God. Jesus has so many heavenly blessings to offer.

God Bless.

Pastor Samuel

**Let's say the Benediction together:
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with us all. Amen.**