

"The Born-Again Dilemma"  
Genesis 12:1-48a     John 3:1-17  
Rev. Wayne E. Gustafson, D.Min.  
February 17, 2008

There are many incredibly rich words and phrases that, in my opinion, have been hijacked by Christian fundamentalism. "Born-again" stands right at the top of the list. I refer to this sermon as "The Born-Again Dilemma" because it seems these days we cannot use this term in any meaningful way without sounding much more narrow and concrete than we may intend. It is my desire to rescue this term and to return it to you in restored condition so that you may use it courageously in your religious life.

The term comes from the reading we heard this morning from the Gospel of John. It is a wonderful story and seems to me absolutely typical of the way Jesus used ordinary opportunities to teach those around him how to live in a new way. Let's review the story.

A man with status and power among the Pharisees comes to Jesus by night. The Gospel writer refers to him as a ruler of the Jews so we know he is important. Perhaps that is why he chooses the cover of darkness for his encounter with Jesus. It seems that this man, Nicodemus by name, has good intentions in visiting Jesus. Perhaps his nighttime visit is occasioned by his awareness of the growing presence of grumbling and criticism among the Pharisees and other leaders of the Jews about this fiery young preacher from Nazareth in Galilee.

Clearly Nicodemus is trying to be supportive to Jesus when he affirms that no one could do such wonderful things unless God be with him. It may be that he is about to give Jesus some fatherly advice about how to be less abrasive so he can avoid getting in trouble with the Jewish leadership. Jesus isn't having any, however. He cuts Nicodemus off, practically in mid-sentence, and stuns him with this talk about being born again (or anew). Jesus says, "Truly, truly I say to you unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God".

Before we consider Nicodemus's reply to Jesus' strange statement, let's talk just for a moment about this word that we often translate as "Again". The word in Greek is "Anothen". "Ano-" is an adverb that means above, up, upwards, and with a preposition can mean "To the brim". Apparently this word is used in an idiomatic way, so that it takes its meaning from the context. As Jesus is talking about one birth in the physical sense and another birth in the spiritual sense we're led to think that he means a second discrete birth event: "Born for a second time". This is how it is understood from a fundamentalist and concrete point of view.

I suggest, though that we not settle for a superficial understanding, because it seems evident to me that Jesus, in this case and in so many other situations, wants us to move beyond existing knowledge to new understanding. So, let's fill out the meaning of this word, "anothen" by looking at its other uses. Born again might also mean born from above, born from the top, or born anew. The conductor of an orchestra might say "Let's take it from the top", presumably to add something or change something in the music. What is clear is that something needs to happen that has not happened before. Jesus indicates that unless this new thing happens, the person will not be able to see the Kingdom of God. Somehow, this new birth allows a person to

see what they have not been able to see before. It appears to be true that what we already know is the greatest barrier to what we might learn. And what we already expect to see functions as a set of blinders that keeps us from seeing more than what is right in front of us. Furthermore, it follows that we cannot enter the Kingdom of God if we cannot even see it.

So far in this sermon, I would expect that Christian fundamentalists would be perfectly comfortable with what I have said. Where our paths diverge is exactly at the point of the very popular question "Are you a born-again Christian?"

From my perspective, the question makes no sense when asked that way. The question implies that an event takes place at particular moment when a person changes status from "not born again" to "born-again". The imagery that Jesus uses does not seem to lead to that interpretation. He talks about the spirit being like the wind so that we do not know where it is coming from or where it is going. Remember that the words for breath and spirit and wind are the same word in most languages. It does not make sense to refer to the wind as an event. Clearly it is an ongoing process. It is dynamic; it is creative; and apparently, if we can believe Jesus, it results in an ongoing process of transformation in individuals and in communities.

Whenever someone asks me if I am a "born-again Christian", it sounds like they're asking a test-question that implies a ready judgment. If I have not done this thing according to their understanding of the rules, then they are quick to tell me that I will not be saved. I appreciate their concern for my eternal well-being, but their question is too narrow. It sounds very legalistic to me and I remember that legalism was one of the attitudes that Jesus challenged consistently in his ministry.

The Pharisees believed that salvation was attained by compliance with the law. If you learn what you are supposed to, and comply, then everything is fine. But to Jesus, compliance with law was more a product than a cause. Moral and righteous behavior was a product of relationship. Jesus challenged Nicodemus and all those who were like him to look beyond their narrow views of moralistic righteousness. For example, the men (the ones who had power in the community at any rate) considered their wives and their children to be their property. Any one of them would not have considered, first, their obligation to their families; rather they would primarily have been concerned about the obligation that their families owed to them. Jesus, on the other hand, treated women as equals. Jesus elevated children and held them up as examples of the kinds of people who could find their way, who could see, into the Kingdom of God. There is a sense in which these powerful pharisaical men needed to die to their old attitudes of domination and be reborn into an atmosphere ruled by love and mutuality.

Jesus called upon the people around him to rely less on what they already knew to be "Correct behavior" and, instead, to affirm their relationship with this God whom Jesus proclaimed as being the essence of love itself. He called upon those who were in the process of being born again to be vulnerable to the power of love.

It's no surprise that Nicodemus was confused. With that one phrase, "you must be born anew", Jesus took the older man's understanding of the way life works and turned on its head. No longer

could he simply follow the rules and teach others to follow rules. It was time to experience life all over again, embodying a curiosity and a sense of wonder not unlike that of a young child.

There is a concept in some Buddhist traditions called "The beginner's mind". It requires setting aside what you expect to have happen next so that you can be open to what actually happens. A person who carries the attitude of the beginner's mind is constantly in the process of being born again. When we affirm, as we sometimes do in our liturgy, that "This is the day that the Lord has made", we are affirming its status as a brand new creation. This day has blessings and opportunities that have never existed before.

I am suggesting that being born again is an ongoing attitude about life rather than a discrete moment that moves a person from the "Lost" column to the "Found" column. The experiences of being lost and found, of seeking and learning, constitute a life that is rich in opportunities to learn and grow.

What is true for individuals can also be true for groups and organizations like churches. A born-again church is constantly in the process of renewal and rebirth. Not only does it seek to minister and to teach, but it also seeks to be transformed by the experience. In this time of hospitality, of opening the doors wide to the community, as a "born-again church", we expect that each new person will bring unique gifts and perspectives. While each person who comes through these doors has the potential of learning a great deal here, they also have much to teach the rest of us. They have a fresh perspective on life that adds to the transformation of the whole community. What an exciting process!

As a born-again church, we testify more to the power of life than to the rules of correct behavior. The more our experiences open our eyes, the more we will be able to see the Kingdom of God, and the more we will be motivated to enter it. I pray that this church will increasingly come to embody life and radiate it. So, stand with Nicodemus, listen to Jesus, and live.