

“TO BE BORN AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN...”

**Text: “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘unless
you are born again, you cannot enter
the kingdom of God.’” John 3:3**

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His name was Charlie, although none of you could have known him. He was a friend of my Uncle Bill's, back in the days of yesteryear. Charlie lived in a small town north of Pittsburgh. He was provocative but he was harmless. He was the kind of carefree soul Mark Twain once described in speaking of Huckleberry Finn, "He had all of the vices, except the unforgivable ones; and none of the virtues, except the essential ones. He was a walking, talking real live existentialist, devoted to the moment. He could start an argument at the drop of a hat, and aye, as they say in Scotland, he carried the hat for dropping. No matter what topic, Charlie had the final word, the instantaneous authority on every imaginable subject. He jumped on every bandwagon which rolled down Main Street. He was converted at every revival. He gave us drinking every Sunday morning and took it up again every Monday night. He changed his mind so many times that he was a kissing cousin to one of G.K. Chesterton's old buddies, "He resembled the cushion on his living room couch; he bore the impression of the last person who sat on him." Charlie was the talk and the talker of the town: likeable, elusive, ornery, and impossible to pin down.

As an aside I say: it is sad that we are in an age when the rugged individualists have been forced to the rear. (Oh not at Sharon Presbyterian Church: You have more characters in the choir than most Congregations have in the pews.) I mean our culture has turned technological and mechanical. We have placed distance between ourselves. Our conversations are hurried, often a series of back and forth recorded answering machine and text-messages. We don't write letters to each other anymore. Email is a blessing to be sure; but I know some people who use it as a weapon; they drop off a little note and go on about their day. While "the busy hum of human affairs", as Milton called it, keeps hastening on. Dropping in at the local drug store or the town square or meeting under Kaufmann's clock on Fifth Avenue belongs to the days of yore. Nothing beats an eyeball to eyeball conversation, never has, never will! Mr. Barefoot once told me in Ralph Tea's drugstore that "you should learn to tell a man by looking in his eyes." Jesus reminded us that the eye is the lamp of the body. But you can't read what's in a man or woman's eyes on your computer. We structure our days in such a way that the old time mavericks have been moved out of the community limelight.

We teach ourselves to play the conformity game: blend in, be careful, be moderate, be accommodating, lest someone think you are craving too much attention, or that you are thinking more highly of yourself than you ought to think. And as we drift into second hand communication, we move further away from the crying needs inside ourselves our families and our friends. We flip from topic to topic, skimming the surface, the way a controlling husband flicks the television remote clicker all evening long.

For me, I still get a kick out of the man or woman who refuses to bow to the conventional, who doesn't care more than a hoot about what other folk think; who just for kicks, raises the roof with outlandish and unsupportable assertions. Like I heard a guy summarize it all the other day in a single sentence, a veritable rejection of our way of life: He said, "All politicians are crooked, all preachers are phonies, all the Arabs are terrorists, all the Doctors want is your money, and Charlotte's new Lynx light rail system is doomed to fail because nobody will ever ride it!" That was a mouth full. My goodness, it took me fourteen seconds to knock down his provocative ideas, especially the one about preachers!

But we were talking about Charlie. The reason I bring him to Church this morning is that one time, after he had been converted in the Revival Tent of Brother Dan and Sister Anne down on East Ohio Street – They were a pair - he went door to door in his small town, seeking out and excoriating every living soul who was not enamored with the sonorous tones of olde Dannie Boy. Charlie broadcast the news that all the Episcopalians, and Methodists and Presbyterians, and even the Baptists, were going to Hell in a hand basket, because - you knew it was coming - they had not been born again! As Charlie had. Then Charlie quoted the text I am using for our sermon this morning: "The Bible says "You must be born again, or you cannot enter the kingdom of God!" Uncle Bill allowed that as Charlie was converted at every revival, "He was one who had been born again and again and again..."

Uncle Bill told me that Charlie made a lot of enemies in town that week after Brother Dan, but not for long. He was soon off dabbling in some other pursuit of eternal truth, always seeking, never finding. I don't know whatever happened to Charlie. I hope that one day he found what he was looking for, although I doubt it. I hope he found the Lord, or even better I hope the Lord found him, at some revival or in front of the family fire, or even in the back pew of some Presbyterian Church in Elwood City.

Some of God's children are meant to wander, "on the boundary" as Paul Tillich called it; but most of us prefer to settle down and in. St. Augustine, that third century giant of a man, who set the pace for the rest of us once prayed: "My heart is restless, O God, until I find my rest in Thee." There are a lot of lonely, restless, discontented, searching people in this transitory world, wishing they could be born again into something new and lasting. I think some of those listening to this sermon are asking the question which the rich young ruler asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus shocked him with his answer! Give up everything you have. It is not a game; it is the very stuff out of which immortal lives are made.

To be born again. The words themselves come from the story of Nicodemus in the third chapter of John. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a respected leader of his people.

He had money and position and power. But one night he sneaked out to listen to a roadside evangelist about whom he had heard miracles. Most commentators think he went by the cover of darkness because he was ashamed to come by day. I don't know, I think he planned it that way so he could be alone with Jesus.

Why do you think he went? This fine upstanding Leader of Men from Uptown Charlotte, hiking out to Morven or Hamlet, North Carolina to listen to a traveling Evangelist. I'm not sure I know, but I think I do. I think that with all his success and finery and power, he knew that inside Nicodemus was a hole in the middle, something was missing, and he knew it. More, he was big and brave enough to admit it. He knew a lot, but he didn't know how to find the peace he needed inside his soul. Most people run away from it, or disguise it, or scream at it. Nicodemus did something positive.

When they got together, he enquired of Jesus about matters of the faith. Our Lord went suddenly to the core, as we would say, he got to the bottom line. He said: "Nicodemus, you must be born again or you will never see the Kingdom of God." He, a famous teacher of religion, was puzzled, and asked Jesus: "How can a man be born when he has grown old?" (Notice that Nicodemus does not deny the desirability, he questioned only the possibility: "How can I do that? Can I enter into my mother's womb a second time and be born again?" Christ rebuked him saying: "Nicodemus you're supposed to be a teacher of the Jews, and you don't even know the first step of faith. Do not be astonished that I said to you, you must be born again

They were familiar with the idea of new birth. The Greeks and Romans and ancient Judaism all spoke of the need for re-birth. The mystery religions of the day and familiar mythologies went so far as to teach that a new birth was needed each and every spring. It runs through most all the ancient cultures and literature. "St. Paul said later that if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creature. The old is passed away, the new has come." Professor William Barclay added that the two greatest moments of your life are, "1) the moment you are born; and (2) the moment when you discover why." The moment you are born, and the moment you discover why!

To be "Born Again": what does it mean? The literal meaning of the Greek words used here, although Jesus spoke Aramaic so even what we have in Greek is a translation, mean "to be born from above, to be born anew, to be born from heaven, to be born into a newness which supercedes the moment of your biological birth. It means turning away from the life you used to have. We need a new heart within, a new soul, a new centering, a new focus, a new being; and like physical birth, you cannot do it by yourself.

The heart needs to be changed. And, only God can change a heart. We buy a new set of clothes to change your outer image; we need a new life in Christ to change the inner one. Our lives are like empty vessels which have to be filled with something. Why not fill it with the right thing, the one thing, the best thing, the only thing? “Come into my heart, come into my heart, come into my heart Lord Jesus. Come in today, come in to stay, Come into my heart Lord Jesus.

I wish I knew what you were thinking. One Sunday years ago I preached a sermon on the need for recommitment to Christ and his Church. I was hoping it might hit home. One of our Elders, I will call him Tom, came up afterwards and said: “You don’t have to preach that sermon to me. I gave my life to Jesus Christ when I was 17 and I have never looked back. Why don’t you preach to the young people here and tell them to reform their morals and to have greater respect for their elders? Once Christ saves us it is forever, isn’t it? I said “Yes, Tom it is...” He said “See?” I smiled, because all the while I knew that he was making a mess of his life: he was cheating on his wife and stealing money from the company, and the whole thing was caving in. Tom would tell you that once you are saved, you’re saved forever. Charlie would say, “Ah no, you must be born again and again and again!” What do you think?

Walk it around the sanctuary with me and see if it touches any base you know. First, our country: The United States of America. I am saying I think it is true that nations also have to be born again and again and again. Arnold Toynbee, the famous historian of a generation ago, taught that civilizations come and go, rise and fall, under a certain set of circumstances. It was an Hegelian kind of formula: first there is the beginning; then comes a challenge; then comes the response. A set of historical events brought our nation into being. In our case it was a desire of the Puritan Pilgrims to find a new birth of freedom: freedom to worship as they pleased, freedom from the moral decay of 17 Century Europe, freedom to form a Democratic Republic, or a Republican Democracy if you prefer, free from the tyranny of the Monarch, free to follow the Lord God, and freedom to share the blessings of civilization. Admittedly oversimplified, but that was our original birthright.

Then, the Professor said, in the 33 different civilizations which have disappeared, a challenge comes, (thesis-anti-thesis). The people have to decide whether to fight the attack or to acquiesce. There can be no doubt that the basic principles which brought America into being are being challenged. I do not need to remind us of what is going on in our world today. It’s a battle. The fact that we were received a blessing from God at the beginning is no guarantee that it will continue now and

forever. It depends on our response to the challenge (the synthesis). As we were born, so must we be born again and again and again in each new generation.

It is also true with families and marriages and relationships. At the start we make a commitment to each other. We stand in the presence of the Lord God Almighty and speak vows which we say are sacred and forever, “as long as they both shall live”. We pray for and receive the blessing of the Lord, and we receive his promise that we will not be forsaken. Love never ends. In a perfect world that would seal it forever.

But we do not live in a perfect world, not this side of Eden. We live in the land of constant challenges and distractions and worries and illnesses and compromises and unanticipated changes of behavior. The fact that a home and marriage were given birth does not mean they will last forever, through thick and thin, in sickness and in health, for better and for worse. All relationships have to be born again and again and again. Or, they sputter on until boredom, bad behavior or harsh arguments drive it to death. To be born again and again and again.

It is also true with Churches. That brings it a little closer to the life we share together here at Sharon. Congregations are brought into being when The Creator God has need of them. But their creation does not mean that they will continue in God’s purpose forever. They, too, need to be born again and again and again. In 1831 your forefathers and mothers, led of the Lord, brought forth on a huge plot of ground on what would become known as Sharon Road in the ever expanding City of Charlotte, a new congregation. God had need of a church full of Christians who would be faithful and would bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ into the lives of those early settlers. They needed spiritual strength to survive. They often spoke of being born again. God gave them a vision of what they were supposed to be and do. It was not easy; but they did it. Good work, you wonderful Presbyterian people. You gave birth to an outpost for the Lord. Thank you; we are in your debt! Now you gather as a cloud of witnesses in heaven to see how we will run our race, looking always to Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfected of our faith.

My wife Peggy told me the other day, when she returned from a meeting of the DAR here in Charlotte, that the subject of the day had been “Charlotte, Mecklenburg and the Revolutionary War of the late 1700s.” She enjoyed it. The lecturer said that during the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, the Presbyterian Churches dominated the entire area back then. So when the struggle for independence came to the fore, it was the churches, including the clergymen, who fought the British. They took up arms and won a new birth of freedom. Much of North Carolina had

already succumbed to the enemy, but here in Mecklenburg, it was a Presbyterian led battle for independence.

Sharon has been a great witness to Jesus Christ for 177 years. You have a great past, but can't live on the past! If we do it, the future will starve to death. God is always up to date. He is asking, "Are you willing and able to help me with the future." It's a new day. A Congregation needs to be born again and again and again; following the exact same Living Lord, but moving on.

When the people of God were out in the wilderness of Mt. Sinai, crossing the desert to get to the Promised Land, some of them wanted to go back, back to Egypt. God told Moses to kick them in the shins and tell them it was their place to go forward. And the people of God were born again, and again and again.

Now, before we go, let me bring it back to Nicodemus, and the way God deals with you and me as individuals. There is no one way, no single formula which the Lord uses to touch our lives. There are as many ways for God to find you as there are individuals in his world. In the New Testament, it appears that with Saul of Tarsus, Christ had to strike him down with a blinding light and that vision on the Road to Damascus. It was a sudden and dramatic turnabout. Saul was born again in an instant.

But, with the original Twelve Disciples, it appears that Jesus approached them in a variety of ways. One thing seems sure; they were all looking for something new. Just like Nicodemus, they wanted more from life. They needed to attach themselves to something, someone beyond the transitoriness of their workaday world. They found it in the presence of Jesus of Nazareth, God's Messiah. They willingly got up from their nets, or their tax booth, or their former occupations and they set out to follow Jesus. God gave them the dignity of their own individual response. But still, each one had to make an original commitment. All of them had to stand up and embrace the new life in Christ. Then they renewed it each day until he was gone; and when that day came, they were lost for a while, until Jesus returned and gave them a newer life for all eternity.

Conclusion

Just in case someone asks you around the dinner table tonight what the preacher said in his sermon, let me summarize it for you before we leave:

First I wanted to alert us that traditional Presbyterian Churches are apt to miss how clear the Bible is when it comes to the necessity of making a firm commitment to Jesus Christ. We try to make it easy. We tend to ‘think’ our way through the Bible and the Faith. We are reserved when it comes to the shouting Baptists and the singing Methodists. We are more modest than to make fools of ourselves in worship: keep it tidy and old-fashioned and please don’t get excited, for we like it that way: time-honored, solid, enthusiastic, but not too raucous, thank you. We shy away from the invitation to be born again, because then we would have to surrender control of our lives to Jesus Christ. We prefer to drift in and out of our faith on our own terms. Christ has the power to change our lives, and he is ready to do it. He is standing outside the door knocking, waiting for us to invite him in. Call it anything you like, use whatever jargon makes you happy: but, the first step in becoming a Christian is the step out and reach up into the arms of Jesus, to be born anew.

Secondly, I said that sometimes that original commitment lasts forever, like Dr. Billy Graham. I was told he was converted in a revival tent at the corner of Pecan Avenue and Caldwell Street, a long long time ago. He has never wavered, not an inch from that original commitment. I heard him say the other day that “To live is Christ, to die is gain.” He has no fear of life or death.

But others are not like that. By nature, they slip back and forth across the line. Their fears and foibles get the best of them now and then. They are human. And, like Charlie, they need to be converted at every revival. I myself went forward at an altar call in Southern California when I was 18 years old. It changed the direction of my life. I have shifted its importance as I look back, but there is no doubt that God used it to change my course. Without that original commitment, I would not be a Christian minister. In the ensuing years, time and again, I have knelt down in prayer and asked God to deepen my trust and my faith that all things work together for good. I am one who has been born again and again and again.

The last thing I want you to remember is that some, many, have come to the Lord without a dramatic emotional moment of conversion. I was touched by the little talk that Rosa Montgomery, Ruth Graham’s sister, gave at Ruth’s funeral up in Montreat not so long ago. Rosa recalled the day she asked Ruth when she had first met Jesus. Ruth replied that she could not remember a day when she did not know Jesus. She said she had grown up with him as her dearest mentor and friend. He has always been there. And she added that she was just as certain Christ would be there when she crossed over to the other side. Praise the Lord.

I want you to take home today a spiritual memory of the day when Jesus first came into your life. To have been born again back then is one thing; to reaffirm it each and every day and decade is another. To wake up one spring morning in Ashville and say “I believe in the goodness of the Lord in the Land of the Living is one thing.

To say the same thing when life crashes in and the lights go out is quite another. To be moved to tears by the Third Movement of Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony as it hushes to its close, is one thing. To be moved to tears each time the eternal sadness of the world thunders its noisy way around the globe is quite another. To say I love you one starry night to the girl of your dreams is one thing; to repeat it tenderly through all the cacophony of the ensuing fifty years is quite another.

To be born again and again is grand and great and good. To be born in Christ again and again and again is the greater gift of the Christian life. The time comes when each of us has to say out loud, "My faith in Christ is my priority, without which I could not live another day."

I was down at the Kravis Theatre in West Palm Beach not long ago where the Queen's own highland pipe band was doing a performance. Near the end of the program they turned to some patriotic pieces which were wonderful. At one point they played the song which begins: "From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli, I will fight my country's battle..." You will recognize it as the Marine Corps Hymn. As the sounds began to circle around the auditorium here and there I noticed a man would stand up. Some were older, one was barely able to rise, a few were in their middle years, some were young, a few on active duty were in uniform. A couple of them were in the Orchestra seats, one or two in the private Boxes, several in the Mezzanine, some in the balconies. But each and every one stood up tall and erect, arms at their sides, chin raised high, rapt at attention. It was a thrill. They were on their feet because they were Marines, tall and proud because they were members of The United States Marine Corp. This was their song. Semper Fidelis, "Always Faithful!" What a sight. Tears came to my eyes, for sure. I left that Hall thinking of them, and how much we owe them for their faithfulness.

But I was also thinking about how wonderful it would be if all of those who love the Lord and are devoted to Jesus Christ and who were born again into his service, would stand just as tall and look just as proud, and remain always faithful as the Marine Corps men did that night. And whenever the proper music sounds, we too, would rise to greet and meet the world, for now and forever more. Amen.

