

“On Being ‘Born Again’”

John 3:1-5

May 6, 2018

This morning I am confessing to an egregious liturgical sin (not my first to be sure!): I am preaching on a **different text** than the one appointed for the day.

Yes, I know, it’s a heinous crime, at least in the minds of the liturgical purists among us.

But, I really don’t care for I am “saved by grace through faith.” “Saved by grace through faith.” which is found in the Bible where?...in the New Testament...Ephesians...chapter 2...verses 8-9? Bless you. When I come back to be the interim again in about 20 years after we’ve worn out Pastor Dave, please, someone, I beg you-where’s Riley-this year’s confirmand. You’ll remember won’t you Riley? Ephesians 2:8-9. Thank you!

Here is the “other” text which is from John 3:

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² 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.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

And then there’s the one about the guy who died and went to heaven. (Don’t stop me if you’ve heard it.)

St. Peter met him at the Pearly Gates and said, “Oh, ya, heard you were coming. Nice to see you, if only temporarily. I assume you’re aware it takes 100 points to get in here.”

“100 points?” responded the man, a little concerned. “Well, no, no, I didn’t realize that. Okay; let’s see. I was faithfully married to the same woman for 52 years.”

“Very good!” said St. Peter, “That’s worth two points.”

“Two points!” the man exclaimed.

“Only two points? You know, it wasn’t always easy living with her. Some people said I was already a Saint!

“Two points,” said St. Peter. “Take it or leave it.”

“I’ll take it, I’ll take it! Well...” the now worried man continued, “Oh, oh, oh, this is good. I never missed coming to church a single Sunday. I was in church every Sunday of my life. Twice a week during Lent. That ought to be worth something.”

“It is indeed!” responded St. Peter. “What a faithful man you have been!

Three points.”

“What, only three points?” said the flustered man. “After sitting through all those sermons? Well, now wait; here’s another really good thing I did. I always gave a tithe of all my income to God’s work.”

“Excellent and He appreciates it,” St. Peter assured the man. “That’s worth another point.”

“What? Only one point for tithing?” asked the desperate man. “You know, at this rate, it will only be **by the grace of God** that I make it in!”

“95 points,” said St. Peter.

While the wonder of God’s **grace** will likely only be fully evident to us when we stand in the place of that man who couldn’t begin to get into heaven without God’s Grace, it is in the **here-and-now of this life** that grace invites us to the **beginning of that new life**, the new life that begins **now** and is brought to fullness in the life to come.

Jesus had a name for that process by which this new life emerges like a butterfly from its chrysalis. In his conversation with Nicodemus, he called it “being born *again*.” That butterfly knew life as a lowly caterpillar, but the fullness of its life, its beauty, its purpose could not be realized until it was “born again” in the *astonishing* beauty of what it was meant to be.

I don’t know about you, but I sometimes wish I could be “born again” in the sense that Nicodemus understood it; that is, start over from the beginning. But, I would only want to do so knowing everything I know now! Otherwise, I suspect I would end up making all the same mistakes I have made in over seven decades of mistake-making!

Samuel Howard Miller says it more eloquently in his book, The Life of the Soul, with a chapter entitled, “Starting Life All Over Again:” He writes:

“It is the rare person who, looking back over his life and seeing what he has done to it, hasn’t sighed for a chance to redeem what he has cheaply used or carelessly ruined. If only somehow, somewhere there was a way to live again the days we have darkened with our blind haste—the innumerable occasions when our indifference trod on all the pearls of God’s graciousness: the times when our pride, or our fear, or our meanness poured the acid of contempt over the fair countenance of another’s soul! If this grace were ours, how we would leap to the chance!”¹

As much as we may wish for it, things cannot be undone, only forgiven. We have to live with what we have to live with. But there is an even deeper yearning we discover, if we are willing to stop the point-collecting long enough to consider it. That is the desire to *change things*, not from the beginning, but *from this point on*. Nothing so shallow as a New Year’s resolution long forgotten by May, but a genuine aching to be born again in soul and in spirit, to fill an emptiness that through all the years has never quite been filled. To be something more and something better than we have been so far, so that a decade or two from now, when we again look back, we do not see only more mistakes that we wish we had not made.

To be born again, **now**, as the “new creation” St. Paul talks about, the new creation for whom “the old has passed away and the new has come.”² It is not a desire to start life over again, but **to start life anew, now**, as the new creation.

I don’t know about you, but I find that intensely difficult to do. The earnest commitments of the morning fade by mid-afternoon into the same old person of the past and the same old aching regret by nightfall. This is true because we have not been able to unburden ourselves from the past; it hangs ‘round our necks like a millstone and by day’s end has worn and weighed us down still again, bent our backs, too much to carry. By ourselves, we cannot do it. Try as we may, we just cannot do it; and that in itself adds to the weight of the burdens that drag us down.

¹ Miller, S., The Life of the Soul (Harper, 1951)

² 2 Corinthians 5:17

But this, my friends, is where **grace** comes into play, what grace is really all about. A person *can* “**be born again when he or she is old!**” Whether you are 60 years old or 16 years old! Grace is having the burden of the past removed, not the mistakes we made corrected, nor the regrets we carry forgotten, but the opportunity to begin again today, a new person, a new creation, a new old person or a new young person, saved and **forgiven** by a crucified and risen Lord.

That quote from Paul in Corinthians about becoming a new creation begins, “*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.*” Grace is about **forgiveness** through Jesus Christ, about the removal of the millstone of the past, about an invitation to be born again from this day forward. It is about going before St. Peter **now**, knowing that the 100 points have already been credited to us. We are already “in!” What a relief! Now, *now* we can get on with life the way it was meant to be lived because we do not have the millstone of mistakes and regrets about our necks to drag us down! It is a new freedom like no other! **This is what grace is all about!** A freedom like no other! ***You can't buy this freedom at any price except that which has already been paid in full for you by the crucified and risen One. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!***

Regardless of the number of points with which we come before St. Peter, [who screwed up himself a few times] we have the assurance of Jesus Christ, our Savior, who says “**My grace is sufficient for you...**”³ Discovering **that** is to be “**born again.**”

And, yes, I know, for the bean-counters among us, if you added up the number of points that man acquired in front of St. Peter, it comes out to a 101. **More than he needed. That's grace!**

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³ 2 Corinthians 12:9