

## Wesley United Methodist Church

March 11, 2018

“God Has No Grandchildren.”

John 3:1-21

On a children’s TV program some years ago, the announcer asked a little boy what he wanted to be when he grew up. “I want to be an animal trainer,” he said loudly and clearly in the mike. “And I’ll have lots of wild lions and tigers and leopards,” he continued boldly. “And then I walk into the cage...” Here he hesitated for a second, and then added softly, “I’ll have my granddaddy with me.”

Granddaddies and Grandmothers are special. Ask any boy or girl. Grandsons and Granddaughters are special. Ask any grandparent. Grandparents and grandchildren are special. God is special too, but God has no grandchildren. God only has children. Every generation and every individual must embrace the Christian faith for themselves. “You must be born again, or you will never see the Kingdom of God.”

William Gibson in his book, *Mass for the Dead*, relates how after his mother’s death, he yearned for the faith that had strengthened her during her remarkable life—the faith that upheld her during her courageous dying. So, he took his mother’s gold-rimmed glasses, her faded well-worn prayer book and sat in her favorite chair. He opened the prayer book because he wanted to hear what she had heard. He put on the glasses because he wanted to see what she had seen.

He sat in her place of prayer and devotion because he wanted to feel what she had felt, to experience what had so deeply centered and empowered her.

But nothing happened. It didn’t work.

It never does! We cannot claim another person’s faith for our own. The example of commitment in other persons may inspire and nurture us, but we cannot substitute their faith commitment for our own. We can pattern our faith journey after someone else’s, but no one can make that journey for us.

I doubt if anything Jesus ever said was more important than this, “You must be born again.” This is the important stuff of the Christian faith. I would like us to look at a few simple questions.

One, what is new birth? We all need to know who we are and where we came from.

A little boy came home from school one day and asked his mother, “Where did I come from?” The startled mother drew her thoughts together and decided that it was time to face the issue squarely: “Ask your father when he comes home from work.” When Dad arrived, he faced a questioning son: “I’ve been talking with my school friends, and I wonder if you could tell me where I came from?”

The father took a deep breath and proceeded to tell him about the birds and the bees. The boy’s eyes got larger and larger. When his Dad finished, the boy jumped up and said, “Thanks, Dad. That was great! My friend Johnny, he’s just from New Jersey.”

We all need to know where we came from. So, in response to the question, let’s look at it this way. If you’re going to grow up, you must first be born. Jesus made it clear to Nicodemus that there are two kinds of life: biological and spiritual.

For either life, for the physical and the spiritual, there must be a beginning.

There can be no life without birth.

So, Jesus is saying that what is true of the physical is also true of the spiritual—you must be born into the spiritual life.

Jesus uses the words flesh and spirit to talk about this. “Flesh gives birth to flesh, and Spirit gives birth to spirit.”

Now whatever that means, it means far more than we can imagine, much less to explain in one point of a sermon. It means that we are brought into a father-child relationship with God.

Our relationship with God has been broken by our sin, broken beyond the possibilities of human repair. The Gospel is that God, through Jesus Christ, repairs what we have destroyed. And what we have destroyed by our sin is our relationship with God.

The universal picture of it is Adam and Eve in the Garden. Their relationship with God was intimate and unbroken. But by deliberate choice, by their sinful disobedience, they broke that relationship. One of the saddest pictures in the Bible is that of the story where God expelled them from the Garden.

We are told that, “He drove them out.”

And that’s our story because of our sin. So, the new birth is a birth to God. It is having the relationship with God—which was broken by sin, restored by grace—by the loving acceptance of God through Jesus Christ.

In Matthew’s gospel Jesus is saying the same thing with other words, I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Now the second question. Who needs the new birth?

I think we can find the answer rather quickly by looking at Nicodemus.

Do you know who Nicodemus was? He was an aristocrat, an educated man, a scholar. We can assume that he was an older man, old in honor, old in years. In a sentence, he was cultured, refined, decent, religious. Let's look at him, in our imagination, as he goes through the night and knocks on the door where Jesus is staying. Jesus answers that knock and Nicodemus stands face-to-face with the Savior of the world. Here is one who knows the mind and heart of God, and before Nicodemus can tell him what the matter is, Jesus has answered his question—not the question of his lips, but the question of his heart.

What Jesus said is this: "You must be born again." He said, I know what is the matter. You have been trying to find peace and rest and joy and salvation by doctoring the outside of life. You have to be put right at the heart. You have to be born again.

So, that's the bottom line, isn't it? Who needs the new birth? Every one of us. Everyone who is still trying to save himself or herself by good works, anyone who has not yet accepted forgiveness of sin by God's grace. I need the new birth.

You need the new birth.

Now the third question. How are we born again? Well, this is what Jesus said to Nicodemus when he asked the same question. "The wind blows wherever it pleases, you hear it's sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it's going. So it is of everyone born of the Spirit."

So, let's acknowledge right off that no set formula is the answer to our new birth in Christ, the Spirit gives that birth. Even so, there is a response that we can make in order for the Spirit to work. First, we must repent—that is, be genuinely sorry for our sin and genuinely desire to turn from our sins and our own efforts at saving ourselves. Two, we must admit our need for Christ, and accept his forgiveness. His forgiveness is offered—we must accept it.

Three, we invite Jesus to come into our life, and we make the willful decision that we will accept him as our Savior and we will follow him as our Lord.

All of this is what Jesus has come to do for everyone, to save us, to give us new birth.

That's what we have to keep in mind, that is who Christ is, the one who gives new birth.

Nothing pictures this more than the parable of the Prodigal son. The central truth of the parable of the Prodigal son is this: When the prodigal son returns home, his father accepts him as though he had never been away. It will be so with any one of us.

"You must be born again." Let us accept his grace and let the Spirit blow where it will to refresh our spirits, to give us life. Amen.