

## Wesley United Methodist Church

March 16, 2014

“New Birth, New Values, New Family.”

“It’ll be dark soon,” a character says in the 1968 western Firecreek, starring Jimmy Stewart and Henry Fonda. Then he adds, “Things happen at night.”

Well, they do happen at night. Take our lesson from John for example. “Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus by night...”

So begins one of the best known stories in Scripture...and also one of the most important. Nicodemus probably came in the cover of night because he was a member of the Jewish ruling council. How embarrassing that would be if it were discovered that a member of the Jewish ruling council was consulting with an itinerant teacher from Nazareth. “Rabbi,” he says to Jesus, “we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” That’s quite a startling statement for a member of the ruling council to make, “we know that you are a teacher who has come from God...” Wonder if he is sincere? Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Now I want you to hear those words as if for the first time. Forget your experiences with many so-called “born-again” Christians. Let’s take Jesus’ word at face value: “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” What would that mean? What would that look like?

Nicodemus wonders the same thing except that he takes Jesus’ word at face value: “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

Nicodemus and Jesus are speaking two different languages. Nicodemus is speaking the language of the flesh; Jesus is speaking the language of the Spirit. Jesus says to him, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” Jesus is talking about a spiritual rebirth. And he is saying that we cannot enter the kingdom of God unless we are born of water and the Spirit. What does it mean? Does it mean for people to be good? Are we able to teach it? Well, according to the Bible, it’s not education but conversion. No one can truly learn to be good, for only God is perfectly good. The light of true goodness dawns in the heart only when God shines there. What kind of lives would we live if God’s light should truly shine in our hearts? In light of Christ’s life and teaching, what changes would likely take place if we were to experience the new birth that Jesus recommends to Nicodemus?

First of all, wouldn’t our lives have a new focus an outward focus rather than an inward one? When we are born into this physical world, we are born grasping things to ourselves. The first movements of a baby’s hands are to clutch, to grasp, to hold. We are born into this world totally self-centered. Recognizing that babies are cute, cuddly, and loveable we also must confront the fact that nature has fashioned the human infant to focus on its own needs. A new baby wants what it wants when it wants it. It doesn’t matter whether you are watching your favorite program on television or reading a newspaper, or doing some chore that badly needs to be done if a baby needs to be fed or to be changed, or even just to be held, that baby is going to let you know it, and it will not let you rest until you have met its needs.

That drive toward oneself is essential for survival. The progress of maturity, of growth, is to learn to escape from being self-centered to being able to accommodate others in the framework of one’s life. That is the natural progress of the physical world to start off self-centered and then learn to share.

But if we were to become new persons, we would have to go further than that. We would have to focus on other’s needs just as well as we focus on our own. By doing this we will reflect the image of our heavenly parent who is God. When we see a little boy we may say: he is the spitting image of his father.

Or a little girl we might say, she has the eyes of her mother. Therefore, we are to reflect the image of our true parent, God.

Such a transformation is difficult for most of us. We are the me-first generation. We have been taught to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, but the emphasis has been on ourselves. A new focus would say that we should love the Lord our God first, and we would love our neighbors equally as much as we love ourselves.

In the second place, if we were truly born again, we would have a new system of values. That is one of the things that happens to us when we grow up it's that we obtain values from our families, from our teachers, and from our friends. That is how values "happen." We acquire them from the environment in which we live. If we were to experience new birth, we would obtain the values we live with God in our lives. No one can say exactly what those new values would be. When Jesus talked of the Kingdom life and said things like "Blessed are the meek," and "Blessed are those who mourn," we can only partially understand the full meaning of his words. Jesus saw the world through his Father's eyes. So, we can only guess at the full meaning of the new values that Kingdom life would entail. Probably many of the things that we cherish most our possessions, our nice homes, our affluent lifestyles would be less important if we were truly born again. We can't really say what our new values would be, but our eyes would be fixed on a new world, a new heaven and a new earth.

In the third place, if we truly experienced a new birth, wouldn't we also have a new family? That's self-evident, isn't it? When you are born the first time into this world, you are born into a family. When you are born into the Kingdom of God you have a new family. This would not be a family of the flesh, but a family of the Spirit.

Now then, who are your brothers and sisters? Jesus asked the question one time, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matth. 12:48-50).

When you experience a new birth, you acquire a new family. St. Paul describes that new family. "There are neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). It sounds to me like every child of God is our brother and sister.

A sheriff and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Keys, lived over the county jail. One day Mrs. Keys, a kind woman, came down to call her husband. As she turned to go back upstairs, she heard someone crying. Listening carefully, she found the sound coming from a tiny figure huddled in a dark corner of a cell. As her eyes became used to the darkness, she made out the form of a boy, perhaps eight or nine years old. "Son, what are you doing here?" she asked. Frightened at the voice, the boy, whose name was Charley, turned. After a pause, he came nearer to Mrs. Keys and saw that she was smiling. Charley poured out his story. In a fit of rage, he had shot a twelve-year-old girl, and he was being held for murder. "But what of your family?" the sheriff's wife asked. "Ain't got none," he said. In an hour Mrs. Keys had permission from the local judge to move Charley from the cell block to their apartment. In two days, Mrs. Keys turned a frightened, half-animal into a well dressed smiling boy.

Soon the Keys' home became his home. At the trial, Charley was sentenced to the reform school. "Can I come back when I'm done?" he asked. But son, you will want to go on your own," Mrs. Keys said, her Christian spirit going out to the homeless boy. "And besides you wouldn't want to live over a jail." The boy looked around. "It ain't jail," he said, "it's home." The sheriff's wife gathered the boy into her arms. Her eyes shone with happiness as she said, "I need a son." That boy became her son.

When you look at children experiencing all kinds of hardship all over the world, can you see them as your sons and daughters? When you see the homeless person in an alley, do you see him or her as your brother or sister? or if you see someone who is hungry, will you share a meal with him? Do you remember the elderly in a nursing home who are often forgotten and alone and will you visit and call them your family? Do you know one another right here in this sanctuary? Do you know one another's joys and struggles, blessings and pains and are you willing to listen to each other's story? Can you

imagine how rewarding it would be to you if you could look beyond your own life to invest yourself in others? "No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."