

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious loving God, caregiver over us all and all nature, today is the day which we seek to be born from above once again. For that, we return to you. We sing the songs of the faith; we connect with our sisters and brothers. We hear again the words of scripture, but we hear with new ears that we might hear anew the lessons that bring us life. As we are mindful of our learnings and gleanings, we seek to be mindful of the world around us. This is the world that you have given us in trust to care for with compassion and love. There are struggles fully close to us, the losses we see, the joys we celebrate, the burdens we carry on our hearts. This is also a world that groans with stresses we often miss on our side of the world. Wars, brokenness, poverty, circumstances beyond our control and circumstances fully in our control rage across our beautiful but broken world. God, help us to be mindful of things close and far, as we lift our prayers to you.

Help us, God, in all these things, to be people that listen to hear, not to respond. Sometimes, God, we get so wrapped up in our own mentalities and our ways of understanding the world that it becomes stale. Your spirit has no room to enter in, and so we must be born again. Help us, God, in this never-ending cycle to be more conformed to the attitude, the mentality, the life of the Lord Christ who speaks contrary to the ideas and ways of this world. We pray all these things in his Holy Name, as we pray the prayer he taught us to pray not only individually but as the one Church in one voice...

SERMON

One of my favorite movies of all time is Back to the Future. In this movie, by a complete accident, teenager Marty McFly uses his mentor's Time Machine to travel from his native 1985 back to 1955. As he walks around his hometown of Hill Valley, California thirty

years prior, he runs into a diner, totally dismayed by the world around him. The issues begin when the people in the diner poke fun at his clothing, completely inappropriate for the period. The man behind the counter soon insists he order something, so Marty starts a conversation. "Give me a Tab," Marty says. "Tab? I can't give you a Tab unless you order something." Here's the first miscommunication at work. Marty wants a drink from his native 1985 named "Tab," but the man behind the counter thinks that Marty wants to start a tally of what he's ordered to be paid later. They've already missed each other. "Give me a Pepsi Free," says Marty. He wants a sugar free cola. "If you want a Pepsi, pal, you gotta pay for it!" The man behind the counter hears this young man asking for something without cost. They eventually end the conversation when Marty asks for something without sugar, and the man gives him a cup of coffee. Their issues in communication still were not solved, and both walk away frustrated.

You wonder why they had such a bad problem communicating. After all, they're both speaking the same English language with the same words, but the communication absolutely fails. Where the communication breaks down is not in the language but the concepts. They are thirty years apart in how they discuss the same words, so the meanings have such a wide gap in between them, they are lost in translation. It happens to us too. I could make an allusion to the Bay of Pigs, but if you have no idea what happened and when, you'll miss the reference. On the other hand, if you turn on a late night show and hear the monologue and aren't up with today's news, you're not going to get the joke. Certain ideas and conversations need agreed upon definitions to be able to have a conversation. With that in mind, just think of how much time separates us from Jesus and the words of scripture. If we just take scripture without looking at the statements and the concepts

deeply, ruminating on them, deciphering what Jesus meant and what Jesus means for today, then we can be having the same conversation with scripture as Marty McFly has with the man behind the counter. We will not be going very far because we are tripping on our own understandings. That's just like our reading. In our scripture today, Jesus and Nicodemus are using the same words, speaking the same language, but the ideas are not connecting. They are talking over each other, but when we step back we can find where the communication broke down and how we can avoid the same pitfalls. Let's find where there was one big miscommunication and avoid that problem for us as we look at the scripture, how we can live in the same area of miscommunication, and avoid it as we seek to live our lives faithfully for the Lord Jesus.

Nicodemus is not your regular Pharisee. Unlike the common Pharisee of scripture, this Pharisee has an open mind and is willing to hear out Jesus' wisdom. He heard truth in the teachings of Jesus and comes to see him in the middle of the night to avoid prying eyes. Jesus receives him. "Rabbi," he says, "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." Jesus' response is teaching and lays the groundwork for their conversation to come: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus doesn't get it. He stuck in the literal, so he cannot comprehend what Jesus is saying. How can you go back into your mother's womb and come out again? It just doesn't make sense! Jesus tries to take him down the correct path, indicating that this new birth comes from water and the Spirit. "What is born of flesh is flesh; what is born of Spirit is Spirit." Jesus speaks of a new kind of birth, a birth that brings humanity into contact with God in a new way. Indeed, the theme, the entire focus of the Book of John is presenting Christ as the way

that we come to be in connection with God. Christ is the example of what it means to be in relationship with God, which is how we dispel sin. Christ is showing how the game is changed. Nicodemus' attitude is simply "tell me what to do!" Jesus' attitude is, "Let me show you how to be." Those are opposite mindsets, hence why we have the problem of miscommunicating.

Our world is full of miscommunications, and we just start with English. One word in English can have five or more meanings just depending on the context. "R-O-W" can mean both the way we move a boat or can be a huge fight. "R-E-A-D" can be the present or the past tense verb of consuming the text of a book. And that's saying nothing about other languages. In some other languages, just changing the tone of a word can dramatically change its meaning. But, like with Marty McFly in the diner, it may not be just the words that are a problem for us; it's the ideas we have behind them. That's what's going on here. We can easily look down upon Nicodemus for his lack of awareness in Jesus' teaching. The truth is, though, we are just as vulnerable as he to hearing well. We can have the same miscommunication today when we look at scripture, and we can come to the text of scripture assuming what we will hear and understand. People hear Jesus' quote: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," and they easily can turn it on its head with the concepts we already have in mind, not always letting it fully speak for itself. "No one can go to heaven unless they are born again," is the first idea that naturally comes to mind. Indeed, those two words "born again" have been talked about time and time again as a requirement for following Jesus. Like Nicodemus, we can easily take these ideas at their first glance without look deeper at the words and ideas that Jesus puts forth. How does that actually work out in the Christian walk? It's not that

simple. As a result, I would nuance this conversation greatly beyond its simple understanding. When we put this conversation in the greater context of the Book of John and the words and ideas used throughout scripture, we find that Jesus is giving us a pathway to faithfulness and not a checklist. Like so many things in life, being “born from above” by necessity needs to happen over and over again.

With that in mind, being “Born again” is not a one-time event. When we think that way, we fall into the literalism of Nicodemus. Christians will ask one another, “have you been born again?” as if it is a mark to check off a list. But the Christian life is never a simple checklist; it’s a way of life, and usually never all in a straight line. Sometimes we have to be reminded of the same lessons time and time again, and that requires another “birth from above.” Jesus is not commanding us to do one thing; Jesus is calling us into a different way of seeing and more than once. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Like God, the Kingdom of God is not just far off but very present and among us. Being “born again” is just as much about working in the current reality of the Kingdom of God as in its distant future.

Think about how we live everyday life. We learn lessons, but sometimes, we need to be taught more than once. Sometimes we need to be figuratively “hit over the head” for those lessons to start sinking in. Nothing in life seems to be a one-and-done, “I perfected the lesson.” Does that apply to any of you? I’m sure it does. So, you may have felt that amazing but challenging feeling of being “born again,” but you must be born again, and again, and again because very few things in this life are “one and done.” I remember my traditional “born again” moment on the night of Friday, April 13, 2001. It was Good Friday. It was the time when I fully connected with God for the first time and began to see the

world around me in an entirely new way. But I wasn't made perfect in that moment. I'm still waiting for that to take place. I look back throughout my Christian journey and notice that I had to be "born from above" many times. I see where I needed to be reoriented toward God once again and to look at the world through that vision once again. I needed to see how the Kingdom of God was working in this world and how to be apart of its work again. But I'm not alone. Think about the Apostle Peter. He was an absolute fool in the Gospels. He even denied Jesus three times, but then he became one of the most eloquent and powerful disciples of the early church. He didn't need just one "born again" moment; he needed many because we can easily get off track and caught in our own issues. The Apostle Paul began as the Pharisee Saul, the greatest persecutor of the early church. He had a momentous "born again" moment, but even after that, he tells in scripture how he continued to struggle with many aspects of his life. It was not one "born again" moment but many that we need as human people. If these apostles, disciples, people who knew the words of Jesus directly can't get it right the first time, what kind of hope do we have? If one of you is perfect out there, I'd sure like to know about it, 'cause I could learn a thing or two. But let's face it, none of us is, and we need to recapture the vision of God, the ways of God, the right ways to live. We change and we often forget lessons we learned before, so we must be born again and again and again from above to reconnect ourselves to faithfulness. After all, Jesus' message was not about "what I should do" but "how I should be," in the tough times and the times where things are easy.

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." It sounds like an easy formula from the way that we have easily looked at it, but like the conversation with Jesus and Nicodemus, communication is often more than looking

at things with face value. This is the calling by Jesus to not only be changed but the willingness to continually be changed into people who walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. This world has a way of drawing us out of seeing the Kingdom of God working among us and giving into the mundane, but we need to continually be reoriented to that vision needed be the people of God today, tomorrow and always. Thanks be to God for the wisdom that is good but can often be found in miscommunication! Amen and Amen!