

Born Again

How do we become a people of faith?

What does it mean to live a Christ-centered life?

In short, what does it mean to be “born again?”

Yes, born again!

Even though the reading this morning says nothing about it, listen closely!

It actually says everything!

Being “born again” is probably the single most recognized phrase, when one describes a follower of Jesus.

It’s a phrase that’s as ancient as our baptismal covenant.

It’s a phrase that comes from John’s Gospel.

When Nicodemus, the religious hotshot, meets up with Jesus at midnight, and Jesus confounds him with what’s necessary to enter God’s kingdom.

You must be born again.

It’s the catchphrase that the Evangelical branch of the Jesus movement uses, where it means having a sudden, intense, personal experience of Jesus.

Personal salvation.

But perhaps the best description of what it means to be born again is sitting right before our eyes in today's gospel.

Here, Jesus describes what a born again life looks like.

The key that unlocks the door into God's kingdom — is how we interact with one another.

Echoing Matthew's magnificent image of the last judgment.

When sheep and goats are separated.

Are the sheep and goats individual human beings?

Or the good and the bad that's intertwined in each of us?

We will one day find out!

But what is crystal clear is that if we wish to encounter Jesus, we will find him in the face of those we least expect.

It's an echo of the story of the rich man, racing off to meet the Buddha.

He sees a woman whose child desperately needs help.

Yet he scurries along.

"I've no time to help you!

I must see the Buddha."

Of course, he never sees Buddha, because Buddha is there, in the face of the desperate child.

To be born again is to practice the crazy things that Jesus commends to us — so that we might develop Kingdom eyes.

Like, “give to everyone who begs from you.”

Even that guy holding his sign outside of Costco every day?

“Bless those who curse you.”

Including my lousy boss?

“Lend to those who cannot repay.”

Excuse me?

“Love your enemies.”

Even the Proud Boys?

My Ex?

No wonder we’ve transformed Christianity into something obsessed with sex and national pride and personal salvation — because it’s so much easier than the true meat of our faith.

Which is exactly where Jesus is taking us today.

While we mostly love our own kind, Jesus says:

“If you love those who love you, so what?”

If you lend expecting repayment, so what?”

How ironic that, present company excluded, our churches remain some of the most highly segregated institutions in the country?

And so to avoid the cost of being born again, we've created a kazillion objections to what Jesus is saying today.

Like,

"These are things to aspire to, but never achieve."

Or,

"Jesus isn't talking about the multinational, integrated economic complexity of today, full of violence and threats of destruction, especially from those Russians!"

Or,

"Jesus is talking about our private lives, not our community or nation."

Which sounds really good.

It's just not true.

Jesus means exactly what he says.

In part, **because of** the world he lives in.

The Roman boot is on Israel's neck.

The Jewish people are beaten, taxed, humiliated.

To think that Jesus' words were more easily swallowed then than now is nonsense.

The ache of being victimized, violated and vanquished was a daily reality for his contemporaries.

Nevertheless, Jesus says:

“Meet physical force with soul force.”

And oh yes, if you want to live, get ready to die.

But, it's less about renouncing things or moving to the desert.

It's about the dying that comes from extravagant giving.

Like the prodigal son, Jesus takes all he has — and blows it!

On us!

He feeds the 5000 — with baskets stuffed with leftovers.

And today, Jesus takes that same extravagance into the messy swamp of human relations.

Encouraging us to waste our forgiveness — on the enemy.

To give — to every beggar we meet.

To let go of our favorite pastime.

Judging ourselves.

And others.

Discovering that the result of letting go is not annihilation — but life!

A life connected to one another, and to God.

“It’s the path he himself walks to the very end.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, with his betrayers and accusers surrounding him, he is anguished — but remains true to his course.

Don’t hoard.

Don’t cling.

Not even to life itself.

Let it go.

Let it be.

‘Not my will, but yours be done, O Lord.’

Thus he comes and thus he goes.

Giving himself fully into life — and death.

Losing himself.

Squandering himself.

Gambling away every gift God bestows.

It's not love stored up, but love utterly poured out — that opens the gates to the Kingdom of Heaven." C. Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, 70, modified.

Jesus is not about being effective or sensible as we understand those things.

He's not about prosperity or efficient living.

Jesus, the very being and substance of God, shows us the very nature of God.

How God behaves.

What God is like.

This God, who sends rain on both the just and unjust.

Who makes the sun shine on the good and the bad.

Whose ways are not our ways.

And if we are willing to jump in with this strange and challenging God, we too can become extravagant wasters — of love and forgiveness and mercy:

Bringing this promise:

"What you do in the Lord isn't in vain.

You're not oiling the wheels of a machine that's about to roll over a cliff.

You're not retouching a great painting that's destined for destruction.

You aren't planting a garden that's going to be paved over for a new road.

You are accomplishing something that will become a part of God's new world.

Every act of love, gratitude and kindness finds its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into this new creation that God will, inevitably, delight us with.'

And what if, every single day, we acted, and we trusted, that this is true?" R. Evans, *Inspired*, 218, quoting NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 208, modified.

Today, Jesus invites us to step outside of the world we think exists, and into the world as God, forever and for always, intends it to be.

It's a world in which everything we have isn't due to my hard work or to your just desserts.

It's the outpouring of God's gracious gift!

A gift to be shared with everyone who needs it.

It's okay to start with baby steps.

Like the meals we provide from our food pantry.

Or Tuesday's lunch.

Or Saturday's breakfast.

Or with our pledge.

Each of these baby steps are a small loosening of our instinctively tight grip on our own resources.

Learning that, in the letting go, it's God who catches us.

Today, Jesus teaches us about the very heart of God.

This God who loves the unlovable.

Suffering the worst we can throw at him.

Who is raised.

Who forgives us.

Turn the cheek.

Give the cloak.

Walk another mile.

Lend freely.

Love the enemy.

Not because it's effective or productive or reasonable.

It's probably not.

Yet, that's how God loves.

There's an old saying:

"You become what you worship."

Today, in the starkest terms, Jesus invites us to worship, in our daily encounters with one another, this strange God.

And in the worshipping, he invites us to bend — so that we may look more and more like God.

Gene Peterson says: "You are kingdom subjects.

Go live like it!

Live out your God-created identity."

St. Augustine says, as we consume the Holy Eucharist:

"Receive who you are.

Become what you receive."

But perhaps Flannery O'Connor says it best:

"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd."

What does this odd way of life become?

It becomes a birth canal, through which — we are born again.

amen+