

“You Must Be Born Again”

John 3:1-17

Jesus' words to Nicodemus, that he must be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God, were very confusing to Nicodemus. He obviously did not understand what it meant to be “born again.” Nicodemus asked, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born!”

Nicodemus did not understand that the rebirth that a person has is not a physical birth, but is a spiritual birth. In Baptism, we are born again through the “washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit,” as St. Paul says in Titus chapter 3. In Romans chapter 6, Paul explains how our old nature dies and our new nature rises to a new life. Paul says: “...don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” [Rom. 6:3-4].

What it means to be born again is for the Old Adam to be

drowned and die in the waters of Holy Baptism and through that “washing of rebirth” to be raised to a new life in Christ. Baptism is a washing of repentance for the forgiveness of sins [Mk. 1:4]. To repent of your sin is to see yourself in a completely different perspective. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in you. Through the Law, the Holy Spirit causes us to be disgusted by the actions of our past, and the message of forgiveness that we receive is the sweetest sound that our ears will ever hear.

Through being “born again” by water and the Word in Baptism, and through the faith instilled and maintained in our hearts by the work of the Holy Spirit, we continually stand before God in our unblemished baptismal garments.

Unfortunately, in our society, being “born again” is also misunderstood, just as it was by Nicodemus. It has come to be understood as something very different than the rebirth of Baptism. For most people, if they call themselves a “born again Christian,” it is because at some point in their life, they had fallen away from the Church, and then, at some time during their adult life, they were, in their understanding, “born again.”

This common definition of being born again after having fallen away from the Church is a result of the lack of emphasis placed on the Sacrament of Holy Baptism by many Christian Churches. A

number of churches do not acknowledge that a person's sins are forgiven or washed away in Baptism. They consider Baptism to be a symbolic initiation ritual that a person goes through once he or she has reached the "age of accountability" and is supposed to be able to make decisions to follow Jesus on their own.

This causes several problems. First of all, we don't make the decision to follow Jesus. The Holy Spirit calling us to faith is a gift from God, as Scripture says. It is no work of our own. Also, it is a shame that Baptism, the Means of Grace, the means by which God bestows grace and forgiveness on His people, is withheld from children who are born with original sin and desperately need that forgiveness. God's grace should not be withheld until they reach some manmade designation called the "age of accountability. No matter what our age is, we are all accountable to God.

And finally, the view that Baptism is merely a symbolic ritual causes a great problem in this: If God's grace and forgiveness is not brought to us through our Baptism, but through our coming to faith. And if it is our faith that causes us to be "born again" after some period of inactivity, then that washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit is not a gift from God, but is a result of you or me saying: "I have decided to follow Jesus." If being born again does not come from Baptism, then our forgiveness would not be an

undeserved gift from God, but it would be something that we had a hand in doing.

I am a born again Christian, but I do not fall under the modern definition of the term “born again.” I am not born again because I found Jesus. I am born again because Jesus found me on November 3, 1968. That was the day I was baptized. Even though I was but an infant, that was the day on which I was reborn.

I couldn’t read the Athanasian Creed. I didn’t understand the incomprehensibility of the Trinity on a philosophical level. I am still growing in my understanding, and will continue to be deficient in my knowledge of God until the Lord calls me out of this sinful life.

But on November 3, 1968, the Old Adam in me drowned and died, and I was reborn and clothed in the righteousness of Christ, just as you were on the day of your Baptism.

We have all been reminded first-hand of the undeserved mercy and grace that God bestows upon all of His children. We have witnessed how God saves us and protects us from the evil of this world. As God’s people, we have been born of water and the Spirit. It is an incomprehensible gift from God. On this Sunday of the Holy Trinity, we give thanks to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit for the many incomprehensible gifts we have received, especially being baptized into that Name. Amen.