

“Reborn...Again”
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
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John 3:1-21 Sermon
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI
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I wonder for how many of us was John 3:16 the first bible verse we ever memorized. I loved it when I was a young child. It was a shining gem of a gift. A divine valentine I could carry around in my heart, as cherished as the precious gift of love it described. God loved me and the rest of the world. Because of that love, God had gone to great lengths for all of us. How incredibly blessed were we?

It was only as I approached adolescence that I began to realize that John 3:16 and the verses surrounding it were not delivered... or received by everyone as words of blessing. That for each person who believed in Jesus, there were many more who did not. Or who had never even had the opportunity to learn about him. That for each person who had been born again by saying a special prayer to accept Jesus as personal Lord and savior, there were many more who professed to be Christians, but, by this narrow definition, fell short by a mere sentence or two. That, for some, today's reading from John formed a solid line dividing the heavenly in-crowd from the hell-bound out-crowd. ...And then there is the inevitable question of why. If we were created in love and blessed as good, why is it even necessary to talk about being reborn?

Like Nicodemus, it's easy for us too to get caught up in literal-mindedness or intellectualism. To say with him, “We know,” while actually struggling to understand who Jesus is and what it is exactly that he is expressing in metaphor. We also have translation issues to contend with. The original Greek words sometimes have multiple meanings or nuances that are not clearly reflected in our English translations. For instance, as we heard in this morning's New Revised Standard Version, many modern scholars no longer use the phrase “born again” at all, believing the

translation is more properly spatial, as in, “born from above.” “For God so loved the world” omits a crucial nuance contained in the particular word used for “world.” In fact, incredibly, God loved even God’s enemies, “God so loved the God-hating world.” And then there is that troublesome word “believe,” which we tend to interpret as a “yes or no” decision made on the basis of concrete evidence or intellectual propositions, as opposed to the trust and faithfulness, which come closer to what people in Jesus’ time understood belief to be. ...Suddenly the picture is a little softer, a little less black-and-white, again.

But whether “born again,” “born anew,” or “born from above,” we’re still dealing with the implication that somehow we didn’t do it properly the first time, aren’t we? That somehow we’re *imperfect* as-is? In one of my all-time favorite books, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg suggests just the opposite and offers a couple of poignant illustrations. The first is the true story of a 3-year old girl, which goes like this:

She was the firstborn and only child in her family, but now her mother was pregnant again, and the little girl was very excited about having a new brother or sister. Within a few hours of the parents bringing a new baby boy home from the hospital, the girl made a request: she wanted to be alone with her new brother in his room with the door shut. Her insistence about being alone with the baby with the door shut made her parents a bit uneasy, but then they remembered that they had installed an intercom system in anticipation of the baby’s arrival, so they realized they could let their daughter do this, and if they heard the slightest indication that anything strange was happening, they could be in the baby’s room in an instant.

So they let the little girl go into the baby’s room, shut the door, and raced to the intercom listening station. They heard their daughter’s footsteps moving across the baby’s room, imagined her standing over the baby’s crib, and then they heard her saying to her three-day-old brother, “Tell me about God—I’ve almost forgotten.”¹

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The second illustration is a poem by U.S. poet laureate Billy Collins called “On Turning Ten:”

¹ Borg, Marcus J.: *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003, pp113-114.

The whole idea of it makes me feel
like I'm coming down with something,
something worse than any stomach ache
or the headaches I get from reading in bad light--
a kind of measles of the spirit,
a mumps of the psyche,
a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.

You tell me it is too early to be looking back,
but that is because you have forgotten
the perfect simplicity of being one
and the beautiful complexity introduced by two.
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.
At four I was an Arabian wizard.
I could make myself invisible
by drinking a glass of milk a certain way.
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.

But now I am mostly at the window
watching the late afternoon light.
Back then it never fell so solemnly
against the side of my tree house,
and my bicycle never leaned against the garage
as it does today,
all the dark blue speed drained out of it.

This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,
as I walk through the universe in my sneakers.
It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,
time to turn the first big number.

It seems only yesterday I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I could shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.²

As the years accumulate and we are socialized, self-consciousness and concern take hold. We are re-shaped in the world's image. We are hardened by pain, loss, disappointment, "reality." And we are separated from our original, pure love and connection to God, as well as our true selves, in all our wise innocence. Protective masks--false, *socially acceptable* selves--begin to cover our

² Ibid, pp115-116.

features until we can no longer see and eventually forget who we once were and who God was to us. When we are proud or angry, insensitive or anxious, we are seemingly more of the world than of God. The truth is that we were indeed created in God's image, but must live "east of Eden," in this brutal yet fragile landscape just outside the gates of paradise.

But, as John tells us, God the wind, God the breath, God the water, God the spirit, God male and female, God active and passive flows and blows around and through our beings, touching every part of us. Even as we disown or just seek distance from God, God loves us still. Enough to walk in our shoes and know human pain firsthand. Enough to send that most precious gift--the Son--all over again to demonstrate the depth and breadth of that love. Enough to approach and freely invite us into the intimate relationship of family. Yet God is boundaried enough to have granted us the free will to say, "Yes," or "No, thanks," or, like Nicodemus, to mull it over and walk away for now.

As the world is increasingly with--and too much with--us, we will likely want and *need* to do this dance with God over and over again. To recommit, submit to the Spirit, and experience transformation, not just once and for all, but many times throughout our lives. To become more and more grounded in the Spirit of God and Christ. The cycles of life, nature, and the church are made for this very thing. After the darkness and introspection of Lent, winter, and night, each and every Easter, spring, and, indeed, every morning offer new opportunities to embrace the rebirth of our real selves in God's image. To throw off our burdens and emerge joyfully from our isolated tombs and cocoons. To come back into the light of God's presence for a grand reunion that looks like devotion to God, compassion for Christ, compassion for one another, compassion for our selves. Farewell to the chains of bitter condemnation and narrow self-interest.

Many of us at one point in our lives or another, perhaps even today, have defined ourselves as “spiritual but not religious.” We have rejected the concept of organized religion after having been hurt by it personally...or simply having observed what looked and felt non-sensical or like insensitivity, narrow self-interest, even corruption. The irony is that *religion* in its truest sense is actually defined as connection to God. Its Latin root *religio* means to bind or connect. While spirituality is about “becoming conscious of and intentional about a deepening relationship with God.”³ Spirituality provides the tools of rebirth, the practices that reconnect us to something far bigger than ourselves...and transform us in that process. Indeed, as Marcus Borg has said, if we took rebirth seriously, “One of the *central purposes* of our life together as church would be to midwife and nourish the process of being born again.”⁴

Inherent in that process of being born again is change. Growth and change as individuals can’t help but generate growth and change in the community in which they live together. If the heart of our Christian faith is the concept of dying to isolated selfishness and being reborn to love, compassion, and connection, then by definition not only we individually, but we collectively, as a church, will and must be transformed, again and again. Indeed, from its very beginnings, Christianity has adapted to the cultures in which it lived, melding Jewish, pagan, and Hellenistic practices and philosophies in its earliest days, taking on the structure and the accoutrements of empire in Rome, and throwing off much of the fancy garb in its migration to the American frontier. But always providing a relevant and resonant context for the rebirth and reconnection of the people to whom it ministered.

³ Ibid, 120.

⁴ Ibid.

Many of the life and faith stories I have heard in our particular context--First Congregational Church, Cadillac--contain elements of *not fitting in*, followed by the joy and relief of discovering a nourishing and comfortable home and connection here, in this small, family-like congregation. Whether the *disconnection* was at home, or in a childhood faith that hurt or no longer made sense, or in an inhospitable political landscape, the antidote was the community built here, where we are free to authentically be you and me. ...And then there are others among us with memories of how, in a turbulent, confusing childhood, a church held us gently and kept us safe in our journeys toward adulthood and independence from those difficult family lives.

When we talk about our identity and our ongoing vision as a congregation, I believe these pieces must be central. Indeed, they already *are* central.

If we think that today there is a shortage of people who want or need what we have to offer, that everyone who wants a church community already has one, we need only look around at one another and remember our stories. At some point before we came to be here in *this* particular community, we were either unchurched or between churches. Like Nicodemus, we were seeking. Perhaps some boldly and probably many a little hesitantly, wishing to do so like Nicodemus, discreetly. The people who are seeking today probably look a lot different from us on the outside. Their stories, their tastes, and their needs won't match ours exactly. But inside their hearts and their spirits are hungry, just like ours were and are.

In the 2009 church profile that was circulated around the country as you sought to fill this position, you described yourselves as a "caring, open-hearted church that fills a niche no other church in this community does..." And when we recently quantified our assets with Cheryl Burke and taped them to the wall of Fellowship Hall, the words we used to describe our

community had a consistent thread woven throughout them. They spoke of warmth, hospitality, welcome, inclusivity, and care. I wholeheartedly agree with these assessments. We have these things in abundance. Which means we have enough for one another, enough to continue to relate like an intimate family of God and care deeply for each other. But we also have more than enough, a surplus, to share with others who do not yet belong to this family. There is no lack, only grace and abundance in the reality of life in God into which we are reborn, over and over. Although some days it may feel like it, none of us walks alone here. We are a spiritual community, dare I say a *religious* community. We walk together and are abandoned neither by God nor by one another.

I have faith that together we can and will continue to be reborn together. I believe in you and in us and in God. I trust in our creativity, in our collective ability to co-create and reinvent, in our ability to rise to whatever occasion presents itself to us, relying upon God's grace. And so I'd like to be the first to put my extra pledge in the offering plate-- the extra \$300 that, when multiplied by 60 or 70 of us, bridges our 2011 budget gap. And I would challenge you to consider joining me in helping to secure our future as a unique, inclusive, life-changing community that welcomes diversity and its own evolution and transformation.

Amen.