



SERMON 837

Second Sunday in Lent

March 16, 2014

937th Week as Priest

763rd Week at St Dunstan's

28th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

BORN ANEW

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the Pharisees, an old man named Nicodemus, came to speak with Jesus one night. It was not to test Jesus, or to cause him trouble, but to express his admiration and respect. He had come alone in order to speak privately, because his colleagues would have thought him a sinner and a fool.

“We know that you are a teacher come from God,” said Nicodemus. The old man must have expected Jesus to return the favor and to speak kindly of his desire to be friends with the Pharisees.

But Jesus always does the unexpected thing. Jesus is always more than you bargain for. He surprised Nicodemus with the words, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

What a peculiar response our Lord gave to Nicodemus—surely he knew that the old man was a highly-educated, well-respected,

successful leader of his people—a Pharisee who followed the Law scrupulously and who was judged righteous by all!

Jesus was saying, in effect, that Nicodemus *did not know God* (because he had not been born anew). And the old man had no idea what the young rabbi was talking about.

Wendell Berry is a farmer and poet from Kentucky. And he is an old man. I can say that, because I, too, am an old man. In one of his poems, Berry writes ...

I know I am getting old and I say so,
but I don't think of myself as an old man.
I think of myself as a young man
with unforeseen debilities.

I don't think of myself as an old man. In my own mind, I am about twenty-four years old—and then I make the mistake of looking in the mirror. I recognize my own debilities, my weaknesses and my sins. Perhaps that is what Jesus was doing for Nicodemus, holding up a mirror for the old man to see himself as he truly was. Nicodemus thought he had arrived—that he was educated, successful, and altogether righteous. Everyone said so, so why shouldn't he believe it too?

But Nicodemus knew that something essential was missing, and that's why he came to see Jesus late that night. He was looking for that which was absent from his life. He was searching for the truth, and he knew that Jesus had it. He was searching for Ultimate Truth,

and he was in the presence of such truth, but perhaps he still did not know it.

“Truly, truly,” said Jesus, not once but three times, “we speak of what we know ... you must be born of water and the Spirit ... to enter the kingdom of God.”

Bonaventure, a Franciscan monk, understood precisely what Jesus was telling Nicodemus. There is a truth beyond the Law. We experience this truth in Holy Baptism and in the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. And we discover ourselves being born anew—being transformed—as we enter into God’s kingdom. Bonaventure wrote in his great work, *The Soul’s Journey to God* ...

Remember that simply reading the words is not enough—
You must ask God’s blessing.
Intellectual inquiry is not enough—
You must be completely committed to the journey.
Going through the motions is not enough—
You must have a spirit of wonder.

Being a careful observer is not enough—
You must have a spirit of joy.
God wants your devotion, not just your hard work.
God yearns for your love, not just your knowledge.
God loves your humble heart, not just your good mind.
Recognize your deep need for God to bless your journey.

Strive for God’s wisdom to be mirrored in your efforts.
Open yourself to God’s grace.

Give God your humble and contrite heart.
Show forth your gladness.
Let the light of wisdom shine in you.
Love God with a holy desire.
Give yourself to God
and realize that you are in God's holy, life-giving,
wonderful presence.
Think of your soul as a mirror, cleaned and polished,
reflecting God's glory.

I know that I am speaking to Christians who have been faithful in worship all their lives. You have devoted yourselves to Christ's teaching since you were small children. You have sat at the feet of good teachers, and you have heard the sacred stories. You have been busy in the Kingdom.

But some of us have been going through the motions, working hard for the church, seeking and inquiring and observing without really understanding that the Kingdom of God is here, now, present, coming and becoming—and we can never be a part of God's Kingdom until we open ourselves to God's grace, until we give God our hearts as well as our minds, until we find within us and around us a spirit of joy and of wonder. *Until we are born anew!*

Note that I did not say, "born again," because that has come to mean a very different thing in most of Christian practice. Being "born again" means making a decision for Jesus, accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, signing on the dotted line so to speak. Being "born again" might happen to you at a tent revival, or in an altar call, or on a Happening, Vocare, or Cursillo weekend—but being born

anew is the beginning of a new process, a new way of living, the start of a lifelong journey to God.

Saint Paul told the Colossians what it means to be born anew, and I commend his wisdom and his understanding to you:

Since you have accepted Christ Jesus as Lord, live in union with him. Keep your roots deep in him, build your lives on him, and become stronger in your faith, as you were taught. And be filled with thanksgiving.

You must be born anew—young or old, cradle or convert, Jew or Greek, male or female—you must be born anew. **AMEN.**

1,028 words