

Community of Christ

Fairbanks Congregation Happenings

June 7, 2006

The theme for this Sunday is "Born of the Spirit"

Birthright bestowed
On the cross to all
Rejoice in the good
News of love, mercy and grace

*"Nothing can ever separate you from the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord."
The Ragamuffin Gospel – Brennan Manning*

I met a man a couple of months ago who had recently been reborn. He was a criminal - a man who dealt drugs, set fires, and robbed homes and stores. He was caught for one of his crimes, a crime in which he had been injured. After he recovered from his injuries - the courts tried and convicted him for his crimes.

I met him just a few months afterwards, at a bible study group. He was just about to leave because he had promised to accompany someone to church, another new believer in Christ, but before he left I found out something about him. I found out that he was embarked on a new life, and that while the consequences of his old life were still catching up to him - he was about to lose his home for example - he had become a person genuinely concerned about others, that he had become a person who not only respected the property of others, but who was also concerned for their spiritual health, and eager to share with them what God had done for him, and could do for them.

I found out that he was sorry for his old ways and that he was striving to live in an entirely new way; and from the testimony of others who were present, I heard that he was happier than he ever had been before, and that his relationship with his family, once very shaky - was now becoming stable.

It was a beautiful encounter - because I had heard the old truth about this man; and then I saw - before my eyes - the new truth about him - a truth given by God. This man proved the lie to the old adage - "you can't change a leopard's spots". His spots had not only changed - they had disappeared completely. He had been born again.

"How", asked, Nicodemus, "can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" No - one can't enter the womb of his mother and be born again, but one can be born from above - born again - of the Spirit, and indeed - one must be born of the Spirit - if they are to enter the kingdom of God.

I think that most people are like Nicodemus - they understand what it is to be born of water - they understand that this means that one must repent and be washed for the forgiveness of sins -- but for many people it goes no farther than that.

Like Nicodemus many people are law abiding citizens, sorry when they realize they have done something wrong, and willing to seek forgiveness and to try again, willing to be cleansed with the baptism of John, and to try to live a righteous life according to the law. That is basically where Nicodemus was at. He was a law abiding citizen, one who loved God, and taught his ways

to others. Unlike the man I spoke of at the beginning of the sermon, Nicodemus was a man who did all things right, He lived as he had been taught to live, He prayed as he had been taught to pray, He worshipped as he had been taught to worship, He was a credit to his ancestors, and honoured by his peers. Nicodemus too, like many people, recognized that Jesus was special; that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God, because no one - after all - could do what Jesus did apart from the presence of God. But Nicodemus, for all this, was not able to understand Jesus and what he was about.

A couple of months after I decided that God was calling me to the ministry I was invited by one of the members of my church to attend a Kathleen Kulman Crusade in Vancouver. This was back in 1974 or 75. When I got there, ushers were handing out white postcards. On these cards were written four words that have stuck with me to this day.

The words were "GOD HAS NO GRANDCHILDREN".

It took me a minute to fully grasp the implications of these words. What I took them to mean was - that it was not enough for a person to grow up in a religious family, - that it was not enough for a person to learn about faith in Christ from his or her parents and to live according to those teachings - rather every person had to make their own personal decision for God, every person had to be born again - no matter how much holiness they had learned and practiced because of the home they were born into.

Do you know how fantastic that is?

That puts everyone on the same basis before God - it makes everyone equal - and everyone responsible for themselves, and that is good news! Especially for those who have not had all the breaks - Especially for those who have been lost, those who have been raised in a godless household, those who, like most people today, have never been exposed to the gospel. But it is even better than that - better because the very words "born again", or "born from above" tells us volumes about the process involved in becoming one of God's children.

Think about it for a second. Think about the first birth you went through, about what you know of it. First off - you are conceived and it is obviously not anything you did that brings it about.

So it is with our Spiritual conception - God, by the power of his Spirit, brings it about - God plans it - and God executes it. As a baby in the womb is surrounded by water, So God surrounds us all with his Spirit, protecting us and sheltering the growing seed, the seed of faith.

And the actual birth is the same - it is the work of the mother, not of the child.

There may be some help of course - help from doctors and nurses who assist the mother in the case of our physical birth, - or help from spiritual midwives, from friends, from evangelists, from neighbours, in the case of our spiritual birth.

In fact the only thing we have to do on our own is do what our new bodies want us to do - all we have to do is breathe. Breathe the air of life, Breathe the Spirit - which, in Hebrew - is translated wind or breath.

How can a person be born again?

Well - all it takes is wanting to breathe the breath of God, of being willing to trust the Spirit and believe the testimony of Christ concerning the Father.

Being born - involves surrendering, of being willing to be pushed down the birth canal to the light of day, of going with the flow of what God has done and is doing in making us new.

Before I became a Christian, I was like Nicodemus - not in the fact that I lived well, because I did not, but in the fact that I believed in God and what I knew of his law, and in the fact that I resisted what was new to me, in the fact that I debated with Christ, asking those who testified concerning him - how it could it be so.

I knew that my life was imperfect, but I could not see how God could live in me, how he could bring me to a new birth or why he would chose the way of the cross and resurrection to bring it to pass.

Finally - because of the efforts of the Spirit, - because of the efforts of many people who prayed for me and loved me even though I was a stranger to them and their ways, I finally - one night - alone in my room - said to God – I believe, forgive me, dwell within me, rule over me, help me be what you want me to be.

I was born that night - born a little one in the faith, with much to learn, with much growth yet to undertake - a growth that, God and myself willing, will continue yet for many years.

To be born again, some people, like Nicodemus, have to give up their wisdom; others have to give up their disbelief; all have to give up their belief in their own righteousness or goodness; which for some - like me - is not too hard, and for others - especially for those who have always lived good lives, is very hard. It is hard to think that our goodness doesn't count when it comes to God's love to our deserving it to our receiving it.

Yet we have to give up credit and loss based ways of thinking, we have to give up our doubt, we have to give up our way of confining God to little boxes of theological perfectionism, and let the Christ do his work in us.

What happens afterwards? What happens after we surrender to God and allow ourselves to be pushed down the birth canal to our new birth? A new life happens, a new way of seeing, feeling, and thinking comes about in us.

We begin to see things in a spiritual fashion, We discover new truths operating in our lives - spiritual truths, We learn new ways of dealing with life in the world, We begin to live differently than before.

It is a different world that we see when we are born again, just as the world of an infant is different than the world of an embryo; and there is no explaining to others, who are not in it, just exactly what it is like - except to say - as so many have said before - it is wonderful, it is beautiful, it is full of light - light that even the darkness, try as it might, can't overcome.

The man I met at a bible study a couple months back could not say enough about how his life had changed, about how God was making him new. He was excited - everything was different for him, and my friends - everything can be different for us a well.

If you have lost the zip, the flavour, the flair of the new life that God gives, or if you have never had it -all you have to do is surrender, - to go with the flow of what God has said to us through

Jesus Christ - to believe that he is the one that God, because of his love, gave to the world, so that everyone who believes in him , may not perish, but may have eternal life.

Believe - and trust - and breathe the spiritual air that God has provided. Dwell in his word. Pray by his spirit. And live by the faith he gives to you. And you will be born again – and grow in the new life God has made for you. Praise be to God, day by day. Amen.

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Announcements:

No Potluck this month.

Ragamuffin Gospel class resumes – 10:00 Class will continue discussion of Chapter One.

July 30th – Aug 4th – Congregational Leaders Workshop – Lamoni, Iowa – See Mission Center or World Church webpage for details.

August 26th and 27th – Witnessing Community seminar. Make plans now to attend this event.

See Mission Center web page for more information

The following is a schedule of those that are currently scheduled to deliver the message for the 2nd quarter. This is not the “official list” and is for informational purposes only. Please refer to the worship schedule in the fellowship hall for changes.

June 11th – Sue Turner

June 19th – Leo & Carole Caesar

June 24th – David Watson

The nursery schedule cannot be posted in the family center for January through March 2006. Please contact Andrea if you are interested in volunteering in the nursery this quarter.

Nursery Schedule:

We need volunteers for the nursery. Please see Andrea Watson.

Please review the prayer list in the Sunday bulletin. If you have added someone to the list please update Leo Caesar with any new information and current status of the prayer concern. Please contact Leo Caesar if you wish to add/remove someone from the list.

Calendar & Mission Center News:

The Coastal Bend Mission Center is proud to announce that the Coastal Bend web site is up and running! You can visit the site at www.coastalbendmc.org

I will be sending out periodic e-mails letting everyone know what is “HAPPENING” at Fairbanks. Please let me know if your e-mail or other contact information changes.

Mark your calendars and **participate, enjoy, reach out!!!!!!**I pray that everyone have a safe and happy week.

Martha Romig