

June 4, 2017  
PENTECOST SUNDAY

## SPIRITUAL BIRTH

John 3:1-8

There are two issues pertaining to the spiritual birth: Seeing and Entering.

First: No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born anew! Birth is an awakening. John Wesley, when he preached about this verse, spoke of the child in the womb who has eyes but cannot see, and lungs but does not breathe. The child is not alive apart from its mother. Birth, in a way, creates an awareness of a whole new world. There are sights to be gained, filling the mind with new visions; and there is air to breathe, filling the lungs and bringing oxygen to the blood stream in a whole new way. Inspiring! Respiration!

Likewise, spiritual birth awakens an individual to the wonderful spiritual world. We can see as if we had new eyes, we can breathe in new life. It's like coming up out of the water after being under for a long time. New life...more alive! Renewal! Being born again – spiritual birth – brings a sense of Life, capital 'L', an awareness never really known before.

*“Do not be astonished that I say to you, ‘You must be born anew...!’” (v. 7) This new birth must happen in order to see the Kingdom of God!*

Now, many have wondered if they have been born anew when they have never had a bold conversion experience. If you remember how, not too long ago, I preached about leaven. *“The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven, or, yeast, that a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”* (Matthew 13:33) Some church members have told me that because they grew up as a Christian, they never felt the need to be converted, really, so they never had that life-changing, altar call, born again experience that evangelical crusades insist is the true beginning of faith. But, for many of us, the change is more gradual, and God works in us the way leaven works in the flour...slowly changing it from within. Of course, the dough still needs to be baked! And for many of us there can be many “Aha!” moments that open the path before us in new ways...even though we were already on the right path. Sometimes there are little surges forward, and sometimes, the surges can be huge. The fire of the Spirit of God still comes and our awakening is obvious enough that we can name it and claim it. Fires like this will sometimes flare up without our even expecting it...if you add to it the right kind of fuel! But...some fires just keep burning steadily. The light may not be blinding, there may never be a spiritual explosion, but we can see the way forward.

So, there is that aspect of the Spiritual Birth that happens in the life of a believer. It is necessary in order to see the Kingdom of God! But seeing is not the same as entering! Lots of people have seen this Church as they walk or drive by! But, seeing it is not the same as entering it.

Nicodemus didn't get it. *“How can anyone be born after having grown old?”* Jesus spelled it out. *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit!”* Here are the two types of grace I've often spoken about: Justifying Grace and Sanctifying Grace. Justifying Grace is the new birth that enables us to see the Kingdom of God, that sets us on the path, the narrow way; and most of the people in our churches have experienced this. They have been awakened and can see the Way. They learned it as they came to Church over the years. They may not think in terms of being justified, but...they are right with God. But we're not finished yet. God is not finished with us at this glorious point. There is more that we can experience in this life. We know that faith doesn't end just at belief. There are fruits to produce! That's why we become active in a Church. That's why we enter into its mission and its ministry. And that's why we pursue spiritual growth and enrichment through the practice of prayer, study, worship, devotional reading, and other spiritual exercises like fasting, almsgiving, and the overall pursuit of holiness! In our culture, though, too many tend to stop, think it's enough just

to become disciples in name only and occasionally practice, without ever going deeper and allowing sanctifying grace to work in their lives. Part of the problem, culturally, is that we need to be yielded, surrendered, and relinquished. And that's not the way of our western culture. We want to be in control.

*"Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born anew!'"*

Being born of water is your Baptism. But being born of the Spirit enables us to enter the Kingdom of God. Baptism is a sign of the Christian covenant. Covenant – Promise – we promise to live our lives under the reign of Christ. If you were Baptized as an infant, your parents promised to raise you as a Christian. That promise is fulfilled in our lives when we Confirm it for ourselves – personally, publically, renewing the covenant and promising then to bear witness to it through our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and through our testifying to our faith! Sanctifying Grace – going on to perfection, and, finally, to glorification!

*"What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit!"* (v. 6) We know we have received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit when we grow spiritually. We not only have the Kingdom in sight, but we strive to live for it, to walk the spiritual walk, being enriched in our faith, and, being enriching in the lives of others. Blessed to be a blessing! Never being a curse in the life of another, but a blessing.

To see the Kingdom of God, you must be born anew. To enter, you must be born of water and the Spirit. How does it happen? Jesus explains. It's like the wind, *"The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."* (v. 8a)

Again, like leaven, you don't really see it working. And like wind, you may not even feel it, but you know it's blowing. Sometimes, we wonder if all our worship, prayer, study, and practice of the faith is doing any good, if we're growing in our faith, progressing on our spiritual journey. But...it's happening. It may be more noticed by others before we notice it ourselves, but we are changing. We are growing. *"So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit!"* (8a)

Use another analogy. Food, and growing up. You don't grow well if you don't eat the right foods. When we are young and small, we want to grow, so we want to eat. You don't see the growth, but eventually, you're taller, stronger, and more able! Likewise, when we have stopped growing, we still need to eat to sustain our lives. Of course, we need to eat right. Spiritual growth may not be noticeable when we are only sustaining our spiritual lives right where we are. But...when we partake of the spiritual food we really need, if we want to grow spiritually, over time, we will notice we will have grown...sometimes, it is deeper, and sometimes it is wiser or, more and more aware. But we grow. *"So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit!"*

And we do not live by bread alone – that which is born of the flesh is flesh – but by every word that comes from the mouth of God – that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. In the Church we should have such a hunger for the Word of God that we get excited when the opportunity to study it together comes. Not only do we get excited, we are inspired.

Breathe deep, my friends! Take in the nourishment that the spirit within truly needs! Seek God's Kingdom before all else! In this way you will experience the Spiritual Birth that God can bring you. And, in time, like leaven, you will be changed. You will be new. And the Kingdom will be very obviously visible in your midst, and, you will enter it when the time comes!

You must be born anew!