

## BORN AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup>“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 3:1-17 NRSV

Recently I spoke with a family member of one of our church folks, and this person happens to be a Baptist. I grew up Baptist in Missouri, so we began talking about Windermere. Windermere is the Missouri Baptist assembly grounds down at The Lake of the Ozarks. I went down there probably three or four times a year growing up: children’s camp, youth camp, whatever. My father often led workshops or conferences there, so since his expenses were paid for, my family would sometimes go along on a sort of cheap vacation,. I spent a lot of time at Windermere.

My most vivid memories of Windermere come from the weeks I spent at youth camp. I went to a bunch of youth camps, and it seems like they went out of their way to get the most manipulative, hellfire-and-brimstone-spewing guilt mongers they could find to be the evangelist each week. The experience of listening to those sermons is a difficult thing to describe to people who have never had the pleasure. A promise of eternal torment is a frightening thing to endure when you are only 12 or 13. After a description of the fiery pit, this adult whom you are supposed to trust asks you if you are really sure that you are saved. It is frightening, because the stakes are high. Whether or not you are going to undergo eternal damnation is something you would like to be sure about, but at 13 I really wasn’t sure of anything. I was barely sure of my own name, so of course I wasn’t sure of where I would spend eternity.

Whenever the invitation time came I went down that aisle, and I rededicated my life to Christ as often as I could. After all, you can’t be too sure about such things. As the evangelists were fond of reminding us, “You could die tonight in a car accident going home, and if you did, do you know where you would spend eternity? Do you really know?”

I joke that at Windermere and at other youth revivals I walked the aisle more than Elizabeth Taylor. Again and again and again, I walked down the aisle, because the only options given to me at invitation time were:

1. Accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and savior. (I knew I had already done that or tried to as best I could.)
2. Accept the call to full time Christian service to be a minister or a missionary. (I felt like this was completely irrelevant, I was feeling too guilty, too ashamed to be concerned with job prospects.)
3. Rededicate your life to Christ. (That had to be it. There were no options left.)

At 12 and 13, there was only so much that I could do, so I went and rededicated my life to Christ again and again and again, just to make sure. I was searching for a feeling, some assurance that I really was saved. I wanted the certainty that those evangelists were talking about, because they were so sure of themselves. According to them, when you are saved you know it. Everything in your life is great, you never sin again. You are sure of it, and you know you are going to heaven. And if you don't feel that way you better get down this aisle. So I went.

One year I had a youth minister, his name was Kelly Owen. He helped me get to a place where I could stop running down the aisle every time an invitation was offered. He read to me out of Philippians, chapter one, where Paul writes, "He who has begun a good work in you will be faithful to complete it." He said, "So Chase maybe you need to trust God a little bit. Maybe you need to believe that the God who has begun a good work in you, when you became a Christian, will be faithful to complete it in your life. Maybe it is not just about how you feel at a given moment. Maybe what this is really all about is God's faithfulness to you." Well, I'm really glad of that lesson I got from Kelly, because it helped me to understand something. I learned that my salvation--my faith--my relationship with God is not all dependent upon me. I'm glad of that, because there are plenty of times when I am undependable.

Salvation—faith—one's relationship with God is the result of many things, including the choices you and I make as individuals, but to make such wonderful things entirely contingent upon an individual's choices ignores the other factors that shape our faith. I always go back to the textbook I read in seminary by the British theologian John Macquarrie where he talks about how faith occurs. The phrase I took away from that book and have carried with me all this time is "faith only happens in community." Let me say that again. "Faith only happens in community."<sup>1</sup>

I believe that we as American Christians have in many cases reduced faith to little more than a single choice an individual makes. We may celebrate our freedom to choose and emphasize the choices an individual makes to chart his or her own destiny, but we dare not forget that there is a lot more involved when it comes to describing our relationships with God. At the very least God is involved, and God always takes the initiative towards us. Faith involves not just lone individuals but also God via the many ways God comes into our lives. It also involves our communities of faith and the many people in our lives who help shape what we believe and who we become. Faith is more than just the sum of the choices you and I make.

It is appropriate on Trinity Sunday, where we celebrate the three main ways God comes to us: God--the creator-parent-father-mother, Jesus Christ--the son-savior-redeemer and the Holy Spirit--the comforter-guide-source of power, that we think about community. It is a mystery, this thing we call the Trinity--this idea that somehow God is both one and three at the same time. There is no good way to explain it. Yet, John

Macquarrie offers the idea that this understanding of God may be confusing but is also empowering in what it reveals about ourselves. Since God is “three-in-one,” God exists—in God’s very essence—as community. God is not just a single individual being but somehow, beyond our full understanding, God is three beings in one. God is community, and it is in God’s very nature to create more community and to include us in it.

At the very beginning of creation God already existed in community as three-in-one. Like a cup overflowing, the community of God flows out of God’s self and creates more community—you, me, all creation, all that is. We are individual beings but connected to the whole and connected to God. Inherent in the fabric of creation, there is this tension when it comes to faith and salvation between the choices you and I make as individuals, the community that we are a part of and the God who created us and takes the initiative in the first place. All of these elements work together to create faith and make salvation possible. Faith does not exist in a vacuum but in relationship with God and others.

The problem with the view that says salvation all comes down to a choice a person makes is that everything hinges upon that choice. The guilt I felt growing up boiled down to this kind of understanding. I knew that I was a sinner. I didn’t have it all together. I had problems. I made mistakes. I did bad things. How could I possibly do all this by myself? I knew that even when I was young. All the evangelists were telling me over and over again how bad I was, so I knew. How could I hope to do this by myself? Did I really mean it? Was I really sure that I give all of myself to Jesus or just a part of myself?

What I came to learn later was that it was not all about me; it was just as much about God—in reality’ it was far more about God than about me. God not only gives me a choice when it comes to faith, but God also helps me to make that choice. God is somehow able to make up for whatever inadequacies, problems and flaws I have. Even if I hold back or I am insincere, God can still take the little bit of faith I possess and make salvation possible as a lived reality.

Of course, one can go too far to the other extreme by saying, “Well, God does it all.” Doing so, leads to an extreme understanding of predestination. According to this way of thinking, God has everything planned out from the beginning. God knows who will be saved and who won’t. God knows who will go to heaven and who will go to hell and has known it all along. The problem with this line of thought is that it deprives humanity of any and all freedom. It leaves us as nothing more than chess pieces on the cosmic chess board, and it presents a God that in my opinion is not really worth worshipping. This God has everything already planned out and knows everything from the beginning but cruelly lets us go on believing that what we do makes a difference in the larger scheme of things.

Believing that our own choices do not matter in terms of our faith and salvation not only results in a cruel portrait of God but also a sort of spiritual arrogance. I have friends who are conservative Presbyterians and who believe in predestination. I like to ask them, “Have you ever met anybody who believes in predestination and doesn’t think they are one of the people predestined to be saved?” Just once I would like to meet somebody who said, “Yeah, I believe God already knows everything and has chosen some to go to heaven and some to go to hell. I’m one of the people going to hell.” An understanding of salvation that allows for the tension between our choices and God’s initiative avoids these pitfalls.

There is another factor at play besides our own choices and those of God. Our communities of faith, our families and all sorts of influences shape who we are and what we believe. Many of us have to admit that the families we were born into and the faith communities we were raised in greatly impacted our faith. If we are

honest, we also have to admit that if we were born in Saudi Arabia, most likely, we would be Muslim. We have to consider the impact that family and community has upon on us and the way God reveals God's self to us within these relationships.

This too can be taken to an extreme. Some theories of social relationships would offer that a person's choices are the sum of their environmental influences. This line of thinking would offer that your faith is mere social conditioning. You never really had any choice in the matter of what you would believe. You are just the results of all the influences upon your life. Just like the views of God I mentioned earlier, this view denies the ability of the individual to choose but does so under the auspices of social conditioning rather than a controlling God.

I would offer that our faith and our salvation--how we end up being where we are as Christians is not a result just of individual choice or just of our community or just of what God does. It is a mixture of the three. These three streams flow into one another. Rather than trying to get out the calculator and trying to make a pie chart demonstrating the percentages of my choices, my family's beliefs and the activity of God, I believe we should let such quantitative expectations go. Instead we should allow ourselves to be amazed and in awe at the mysterious mixture of forces that led us to our present places on our spiritual journeys.

What if instead of thinking about salvation and faith as a math equation we thought of it as a dance. Samuel Becket, the playwright, said, "Dance first; think second. It is the natural order of things." I think his words get at how we wrestle with the mystery of salvation. Questions of how one becomes a Christian, whether one is truly a Christian, who is not a Christian, who has faith, who doesn't, who is going to heaven, who is going to hell all ask for a kind of certainty and finality that I don't believe we were meant to possess. Instead, let's pause for a moment. Let's dance a little bit first. Let's dance with God and realize that our experience of God and faith and one another is much more mysterious and fluid. Rest with assurance in the arms of a gracious and compassionate God and enjoy the dance. The dance is much more important than worries about the mechanics of who gets into heaven and how.

In college I had to write a spiritual autobiography—a description of my own spiritual journey. I think it was the first time that I ever realized my faith and my relationship with God did not begin on the day I made my own decision to become a Christian. When I look back on my life, being raised in a Christian home, I have to admit that God was always real to me. I was raised knowing God.

In my spiritual autobiography, I told a story of when I was young and locked out of my house. I got home from school before my older sister did only to realize that I did not have a house key. While waiting for her, I prayed, "God please let me get into my house, it is cold outside. Please let me get into my house." My sister came home with her key, along with a friend of hers, and she asked what I had been doing while waiting. I told her that I'd been praying for a way to get inside the house. My sister's friend said, "Well, I guess that didn't work." My reply to her was "Well, you came, didn't you?" As a child, God was very real to me. God was answering prayers. God was a reality well before I ever decided to become a Christian.

I was reminded recently of this truth when I had to answer the spiritual questions of my four year-old. Each night as I put him to bed I sing with him. I don't know many songs, and the few I know are Christian camp songs and hymns. (I'm sure I could be accused of brainwashing him.) One of these songs mentions praising God, and Julian asked, "Dad what is praise?" I had to think for a minute before I replied, "Praise is when you tell somebody they did something good." He then asked, "How do we praise God?" Again, I had to

think for a minute, and then I replied, “We tell God that God is good and does good things.” The questions continued, so we talked about God and praying and how Julian can pray whenever he feels like it.

Previously, he had asked, “How do I go to where God is?” Jennifer and I tried to explain that we can’t go to heaven where God is, so we have to imagine it in our minds. So that night where he asked so many spiritual questions, Julian said, “Let’s praise God right now.” I agreed and prayed, “Dear God you did a really good job when you made Julian. Amen.” He responded in a concerned way, “No don’t do it like that, whisper it into my ear, into my brain where I’m picturing God.” So I whispered into his ear, “Dear God, you did a good job when you made Julian. Amen.” He said, “All right, now I’m going to do it to you.” He then whispered into my ear, “Dear God, you did a good job when you made me. Amen.”

For Julian, God is real. Jesus is real. The Spirit is real. These things are real to him even though he has not yet reached an age to make his own decision to become a Christian. The experiences children have of God should help us to realize that our faith journeys do not begin whenever we became a Christian or get baptized or join a church. Instead, our journeys of faith are life-long. Along the way, God’s work has mixed with the influences of our families, our communities and our own choices to bring us to an experience of faith and salvation. Faith is a process rather than a one-time choice that we make.

As I look back over my life, I feel that my spiritual journey could best be described not as being born again once but as being born again and again and again. My apologies to those of you who read the sermon title and came this morning expecting I would preach about reincarnation. That is not what I’m talking about. Instead, I mean to say that Jesus continually offers us new chances to experience God in deeper ways, and if need be, chances to start over again.

In the passage from John where Jesus uses the phrase “born again,” he also talks about some weird stuff regarding him being lifted up just as Moses lifted up a snake in the desert. If you don’t know what he’s talking about, it is okay. He is referring back to a passage in the book of Numbers in the Hebrew Bible. This passage tells of when the Israelites were in the wilderness, and they kept getting bitten by snakes. In response, God gave them the antidote, which involved making a snake out of bronze and putting it up on a tall pole. Any time someone got bit by a snake they could look up at that pole and be cured. I kind of wonder why Moses and God didn’t work it out so that a single look at the bronze snake would cure you of snake bite forever. Instead, they kept having to look up again and again. Similarly we as people of faith have to keep looking up again and again to the cross. We have to look to Jesus when our own bad decisions or inadequate understandings turn around and bite us..

The grace of this arrangement is that we get to start over. When we’ve blown it--when we’ve really done things to mess up our lives, God is always there to give us a second chance or a third chance or a fourth chance to be born again. There is always another chance to begin anew. I don’t wish to be understood as if I’m advocating that one can lose his or her salvation. I don’t believe salvation is ours to lose. Instead, I am trying to emphasize that our encounter with the saving God is never-ending, and therefore new life, new birth is always possible. Our experience of salvation is not limited to a single event, and our faith is more than just a single decision we make. Just as our faith journeys have a beginning well before our conscious choices, so also do they have an ending long after the opportunity to choose is past.

Thanks to the choices we make, the communities that shape us and the grace of God, each of us along the way can be born again and again and again and again. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “Faith only happens in community.” is not how Macquarrie puts it but rather a paraphrase that a group of friends and I came up with in seminary to describe his point. Macquarrie uses the language of existential philosophy to explain his theology, and it is difficult to extract and quote in a pastoral setting. Anyone wishing to read Macquarrie’s own words can turn to his chapter on “Human Existence,” specifically pages 79-81. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977).