

John 3:1-8 “Happy Re-Birthday”

A few weeks ago, I gave you a little glimpse into my spiritual journey by showing you pictures of churches I attended in the early years of my faith journey. For a while, I didn't attend church at all until after I made a confession of faith at Clydehurst Christian Ranch in Montana. If I had a little more time and resources, I would have visited there this summer because it is definitely one of my “holy thin-places” where God intersects in very bold and beautiful ways with the earthly realm. I don't have the exact date on my confession of faith other than it was in July of 1983. I told you all I was baptized on November 18, 1983, but that didn't seem right. I didn't think I was baptized so soon after I made that confession of faith. So ... thanks to my iPhone calendar, I was able to scroll back to check, and I realized it was November 18, 1984. How do I know that? Because 1984 was a year where November 18th fell on a Sunday, and I *know* that I was baptized at a Sunday evening service at the Veneta Alliance Church. Mystery solved. So on Friday I'll be 32 years old. Sounds a lot better than last month when I had to admit I turned 50, right? I wasn't the only one baptized that evening. My friend Lori Brinson was too. For a long time, she and I would post “Happy Re-birthday” on each other's FaceBook pages.

So ... clearly I'm preaching about baptism today. And you might be thinking, “Okay, if you're preaching about baptism, why aren't we in Acts 2:38 where Peter says, ‘Repent and be baptized?’ Why aren't we over in Acts 8 where Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch? All four gospels include accounts of Jesus' baptism ... why not preach about John baptizing Jesus?” Because if this week is my “re-birthday,” I want to talk about what baptism has to do with being “born anew.” John's account of Nicodemus visiting Jesus is where we get that term. Actually, the more familiar phrase we hear these days is, “born again” as in “Born Again Christian.” Unfortunately, for some reason, that conjures up images of hellfire and brimstone churches who often emphasize the fiery and catastrophic fate of those who die without being

baptized. After all, Jesus said right here, “Very truly, I tell you, not one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit.”

Now if the term “water” in this passage actually referred to *baptismal* waters you’d have a pretty good argument for the concept of baptism as fire insurance. But when you get into the Greek of it, “water” in this context, refers to the waters of birth. So when you look at it this way, *everybody* is “born of water.” Human beings do not come into this world without passing through the waters of birth. Okay, but Jesus said one *also* has to be born of Spirit. Well ... you can’t be born of flesh without also being born of spirit. The word for “spirit” in Greek is “pneuma.” In both Greek and Hebrew, this word is interchangeable with “wind” and “breath.” You can’t live if you’re not breathing, right? So if you are born into this world, water and spirit are always involved. Nothing shocking about that concept at all. *Everyone* in the ancient world knew that we’re all born of water and spirit. Now ... if you notice in most Bible translations, the word “Spirit” is capitalized which lets you know that what Jesus is telling Nicodemus about is the “Holy Spirit.” Well, is it capitalized in Greek? No! When you pick up an ancient manuscript, the letters are either in all caps or all lower case. No punctuation, no accent marks, no *nothing*. So how do we know Jesus means, “*Holy Spirit*?” It’s all about context folks! And that’s part of the fun of Bible study when you have to read it in Greek.

See, Jesus loved to use word play in his teaching. Nicodemus came to Jesus in the middle of the night to tell him, “I believe you are the real deal as far as Rabbis go! You must be sent directly from God, because no one can do the things you do apart from God!” And here’s where Jesus casts the line. “Well, you know ... no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew.” Nicodemus said, “Now wait a minute ... how can someone be born anew? That’s impossible!” BAM!! Bait taken. Time to reel Nicodemus in! If this was one of those movies where the hero breaks the fourth wall to speak to the audience, this is where Jesus would turn to the camera, wink, and smile and there’s be a little animated “sparkle tooth” effect for emphasis.

“So Nicodemus. Everyone is born of water and Spirit, right?” Yup ... yup, I’m with you Jesus. (Nick couldn’t see that Jesus capitalized “Spirit,” right?) “Well, Nick, you can’t see the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Ok ... ok. (He still can’t see the uppercase “S.”) And then Jesus hits Nicodemus with this: “What is born of the flesh, is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit, so don’t be surprised when I say you have to be born from above, because the wind ... the air ... the “little s” spirit ... it blows where it wants, and you can hear it ... but you don’t know where it comes or goes. So it is with everyone born *of the Spirit*.” And all of a sudden Nicodemus hears that capital “S” and understands what Jesus was talking about! You can’t see the Kingdom of God without the presence of the Holy Spirit. That’s what being born again is all about!

Cue gospel music, put your hands in the air, and sing Glory to God! What does this *not* say? It does *not* say that you have to get baptized to go to heaven. It says that you, as a human being who was born into this world through the waters of birth, will only be able to recognize the Kingdom of God when you see the “capital S!” That’s when you’re born anew ... born from above. And this, my friends, is why I embrace the label “Born Again” when I explain who I am in relation to my faith. There was nothing “magic” about the waters in the baptistery at the Veneta Alliance Church that changed me. I was “born anew” when I chose to follow Jesus in July of ‘83. But ... I was also “born anew” when I made a public confession of my faith on November 18th, 1984 and “clothed myself in Christ” as the Apostle Paul said. And as I think about it, I’ve been “born anew” *many* times in my journey of faith. Every time I come to a new understanding of something that I didn’t know before ... every time I lay aside a prejudice I’ve held on to ... every time I discover that my ways don’t line up with God’s ways ... every time my eyes are opened to a new understanding of what it means to live under the reign of God ... every time I forgive someone who has hurt me ... every time I am forgiven by someone who I’ve hurt ... every

time I say, “Wait a minute ... Jesus wouldn’t do that” and I change my ways to conform to Jesus’ ways ... I am born again.

I can feel the nervous energy in this room ... a room that is filled mostly with people who are steeped in a church tradition whose three highest sacraments are communion, the priesthood of all believers, and BAPTISM! So let me clarify before any feathers get ruffled, okay?

Is baptism important? Absolutely! Is it necessary? Yes, I think it is. But not in the way that some folks think it’s necessary. Here’s an extreme example: There were some missionaries who were working with aboriginal people in a place where there wasn’t enough water to immerse someone. Immersion is how we and many Protestant churches baptize. The person being baptized is immersed in water and brought up again. That’s how Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River. Good enough for Jesus, good enough for us, right? If you come to me and say, “I want to be baptized,” that’s how I’m going to do it. But what if, let’s say in the case of these aboriginal people, you don’t have enough water to immerse? The missionaries had a brilliant idea. They said, “Well, if baptism is an outward profession of an inward confession, and it signifies the washing away of sins, and becoming a new creature in Christ, let’s talk with these folks and see if we can work out an equivalency.” Now the way these particular aboriginal people “cleansed” themselves was with white ashes. So the missionaries came up with this baptismal rite of passage that involved people *scrubbing* or “immersing” themselves in ashes. So how do you think that went over with the mission board back in the States? Not so well!

They couldn’t believe that their missionaries would condemn these poor “natives” to hell by not immersing them in water, so they fired the missionaries, and trucked in enough water to immerse these folks. Now put yourself in these aboriginal people’s position: All of a sudden these missionaries who have been working with you for years ... people you’ve learned to trust and love ... they are yanked away and replaced by new people who you do not know and who do not know you. And

now they're in your space and up in your business with a tank full of more water than you've seen before ... *ever*. And they say, "We need to dunk you in this water so that you don't burn in hell." See, I don't think that's why baptism is necessary. I've heard horror stories about churches requiring people to get re-baptized because maybe a foot or a hand didn't go all the way underwater. Some have even required people who were paralyzed or otherwise physically incapable of going under water to be immersed anyway, because they believed that it's the act of immersion itself that "saves" a person. And many of those churches go right to passages like this one in John to "prove" that water is necessary to be born again and thus enter into God's Kingdom.

To be "saved" is not why I think baptism is necessary. I think that baptism is a necessary part of the faith journey for people who are prepared to say, "I'm ready to clothe myself in Christ" to quote Apostle Paul. "I'm ready to bury my old self, my old ways, my old habits, my old hang-ups, and all the things that hinder my relationship with God and become a new creature in Christ." And again, baptism isn't a destination. It is part of a process. The Apostle Paul in Philippians 3:12-13 writes, "Not that I have *already obtained* all this ... I do not consider myself *yet to have taken hold of it*." Being "born again" is something that happens again and again. We never really "get hold of it" especially if the "it" we're talking about is some sort of trophy that we capture, stuff, and mount on a wall. If anything it's a starting point. After baptism we still continue to find ways to keep seeking for new ways of living, thinking, loving, and learning. Those "re-birthing" moments help us clarify what we already know and believe. And they become *more* true over time ... more resonant with the infinite glory that is God.