

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Second Sunday of Lent: March 5, 2023

“Born of the Spirit”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on the Second Sunday of Lent. I wonder how many of us read this scripture and wonder the same questions as Zacchaeus? Do you ever wonder about why we do baptism and what it really means? Do you have the same question, what does it mean to be born again?

Many famous church readings express that birth through water and the Spirit are necessary in the Christian life, just as natural birth is necessary for human life. Both kinds of birth are only the necessary beginnings. We are meant to be more than newborn babies. We are meant to be more than only baptized. We are meant to grow with, in, and through the power of the Spirit into new beings. All lofty language, but what does all that really mean?

For Nicodemus, he is a very esteemed teacher of the law. He and the Pharisees spent their lives in the devotion of studying the law. They then employed scribes to record their musing and check every letter, every meaning, and then teach. These Pharisees are what we might call religious fanatics. In fact, in their tradition there were supposed to be never more than 6,000 of them and they had taken a solemn vow that they would devote their entire lives to studying the law. But as we know, when left to human devices, these religious leaders not only studied the law, but they also enforced it. This resulted in

them being the judges of those in their community, and often (as you might expect) they were not well liked.

Nicodemus had studied the law, but he had never done any signs or miracles. So, he recognized that Jesus was connected to God, and for his own concerns, wanted to know how to connect better with God. Because of the strict laws, and the fact that Jesus was stirring up the people, he visited Jesus at night.

Can you imagine a man who had prided himself in learning the law and then judging others (feeling that it was the right thing to do as a vow and calling of God) being so awe-struck by Jesus' miracles? Yet when he really gets into conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus recognizes he doesn't understand the God he has been striving all his life to know. He is told God loves the world, and Jesus is there not to judge but to save.

This is not the God that Nicodemus knows. Going back a few Sundays, Nicodemus knows the God of fear and trembling, not a God of love. In actuality, "God so loved the world" is all he, or in fact you, need to know. Because if you are hearing this, God already loves you, and that could be the end of the sermon.

As we all know, and just read earlier in our service, the Ten Commandments were the gold standard of living in communion with God. Now Jesus was gently reminding Nicodemus that the law alone is not enough. The law alone can only apply to the natural human. However, once the law has been spiritually placed in one's heart, its meaning expands from one of judgment to

one of guidance. The Spirit therefore, changes the heart. From Spirit a new being emerges, is birthed.

From Jesus' teachings the Episcopal church has written a form of the Ten Commandments. This is not from the old traditional Hebrew standpoint, but instead from the view of the Spirit, a view after the resurrection of Jesus. I think this is very important for people to ponder. In our prayerbook (I know those taking my class will remember) on page 858 of the Book of Common Prayer, we see the advancement of Jesus' teachings. We see the Spirit at work. Our prayer book reminds us, and I remind you here:

Our duty is to believe and trust in God, therefore leading us to love and obey God and bring others to know him, while putting nothing in the place of God. We are to show God respect in thought, word and deed and set aside regular times for worship, prayer, and study to grow our relationship with God.

We are to love our neighbors as ourselves and do unto others as we would wish them to do to us. We are to honor our parents and family and honor those in authority. To show respect for the life God has given us, to work and pray for peace, to bear no malice, prejudice, or hatred in our hearts, and to be kind to all the creatures of God.

To be good to our bodies and use them as God intended, to be honest and fair in our dealings while seeking justice, freedom, and the necessities of life for all people and to use our talents and possessions as ones who must answer for them to God. We are to speak the truth and not mislead others, and to resist

temptations to envy, greed, and jealousy, and to rejoice in other people's gifts and graces, as those gifts were also endowed by God.

Basically, we are called by God, to do these things. Yet we struggle; we are human. The ritual of baptism, of being buried under the water, coming up into the air, and sealed with the Holy Spirit is a way of confirming and reminding us of something we were already striving for.

Oscar Romero reminds us also today, that it is not enough just to say that one repents of a sin; it is also necessary to repair the harm that was done. It is not enough to judge, either yourself or someone else, but instead to correct the behavior. This is why the Spirit is so important. It is the Spirit that can lead us and strengthen us to the change that needs to happen; to truly become that new person Jesus wants us to be.

If Jesus came not to condemn but to save, then it is also not our job to condemn. Instead we are to work on our own salvation so that we may become an example, a light in the dark, the template for others remembering that we too have and will continue with our own struggles. When all is said and done, God will not ask about your neighbor, he is going to ask about you.

For Nicodemus, these teaching were shocking. For us today, I feel sometimes we just get lazy. This Lent, I ask you to reflect, not on the harsh Old Testament wordings of the commandments, but instead look at the expanded language of Jesus' teachings through the lens of the Spirit, learning how to love each other and create the beloved community. Amen.