

“You can't see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

That is what Jesus tells Nicodemus in today's gospel lesson. “You can't see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

I find this simple, declarative statement from Jesus to be one of the most problematic things he says in the Bible....and that's probably because of the different translation that is often used to browbeat people into following a certain tradition of Christianity.

Instead of the phrase “be born from above, the words “born again” are used.

There are four general English translations of the original Greek word “anothen.”

Born anew
Born from above
New birth
And....Born again!

When I was younger, evangelical Christians I knew used the phrase “born again” as a litmus test of your faith. Are you born again? You must be born again! It was actually an accusation many times. Have you been born again? If not, then you are not really a Christian.

I am not indicting anyone on their belief system. If someone wants to use the phrase “born again” as the mantra, that is fine.

But what about those of us who aren't so certain what that means and do not feel called to insist that everyone else proclaim they are “born again.”

It's troubling to me, and somewhat confusing.

Even Nicodemus is confused by it. When Jesus says, “You can't see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” Nicodemus is puzzled. His response is natural. I'm a grown adult. How can I climb back into my mother's womb and, as you suggest, Jesus, be born a second time?

Jesus says it isn't a literal act of birth, but a different kind of new birth...with water and the Spirit. Water and the Spirit.

That, my friends, sounds just like baptism.

To be born from above...born anew...born again...to have new birth...you must be born with water and the spirit. You must be baptized.

In his commentary on the Gospel of John, William Barclay explains the original ancient Greek word in this passage, “another”, has three different meanings.

It means: Again, in the sense of for the second time

It concurrently means: From above...from God

At the same time it also means: From the beginning, completely and radically.

When we are baptized, we are indeed, “born AGAIN” in the sense that we are living, breathing humans, but we are receiving new life in water and the Spirit. It is the second time we are born.

When we are baptized, we are receiving this birth from above....from God.

And here’s my favorite part, when we are baptized we are starting again from the beginning – completely and radically – completely and radically! Now we’re talking my language.

I often felt my high school friends who would state they were “born again” thought that was the end of it. I’m born again, I’m saved, I’m done. But no, my friends. Being born again – born anew – born from above is the just the beginning of our lifelong call to serve God.

The beauty of our baptismal liturgy in the Episcopal Church is that every time someone is baptized for the first time – born for the second time - we re-commit ourselves to our own baptismal covenant. We are born from above each time someone is baptized. We are born anew each time someone is baptized. And I now proudly proclaim that we are born again each time someone is baptized....because we renew our own baptismal vows every time there is a baptism.

From the beginning – completely – radically – we are born again, born anew, born from above - every time we take part in renewing our own baptismal covenant.

The first part of the covenant is the creed – the things we believe – and we make these bold statements every week.

It’s the second part of this baptismal covenant that we don’t profess often enough. It’s these questions to which we respond that radically and completely take us back to the beginning. You can be born again anytime by renewing your own baptismal vows. They are found in the Red Book of Common Prayers on page 305.

We promise to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and prayers. Completely

We pledge to persevere in resisting evil and whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to God. Totally and completely

We promise to proclaim by word and example – WORD and EXAMPLE - the Good News of God in Christ.

That is radical, my friends.

We promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving every single person in the world as much as we love ourselves.

Radical.

We pledge we will work for justice and peace among all people, and we proclaim that we will respect the dignity of every human being.

Every human being. Not just the people like us, but every human being.

In the climate of this country, this society, this culture – that is radical.

We promise all these things in community and we ask God's help because it is difficult to travel this journey on our own.

Baptism is what Jesus is talking about. When we are baptized we are born again, born anew, born from above.

We believe that we only need that sacrament of baptism one time. But we also believe that as often as possible we need to remind ourselves and proclaim to the world around us that we are beginning again, completely and radically, by proclaiming our baptismal covenant.

Jesus told Nicodemus “You can't see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Jesus didn't say you needed to be born from above “to be a Christian” or “to follow him.”

Jesus said, “You can't SEE the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

I think this is often interpreted to mean that you won't get into heaven unless you are born again. That is certainly how I felt when my evangelical friends in high school pestered me with questions about being born again.

But remember, my friends. We are called to bring the kingdom of God right here to earth. We are called to build God's kingdom right here and right now. We pray it together every single week. Your kingdom come. Your will be done. On earth as it is in heaven.

We want to see the kingdom of God right here and right now. And we don't want to only SEE the kingdom of God – we want to LIVE IN God's kingdom right here on earth. We want God's **love** and **grace** and **forgiveness** and **redemption** to be available to everyone – and that mean absolutely everyone.

We can't do that until we have been born anew, born again, born from above – and that is just the first step – the very beginning – of our journey in Christ.

Completely and radically starting from the beginning each time we remember our own baptismal covenant....

We WILL see the kingdom of God when we:

- Follow the apostle's teaching and fellowship
- Break bread together
- Resist evil and, when necessary, repent and return to God.
- Proclaim the Good News of God in Christ with our words AND our actions.
- See Christ in all people.
- Serve Christ in all people.
- Love ourselves and equally love everyone else.
- Fight for justice and peace for all people
- Respect the dignity of every human being.

Let us be a radical.

Let us born anew.

Let us be born from above.

And yes, let us be born again.