

Born Anew from Above

This is the season when school year ends, the season of awards assemblies and graduations – and final exams. For high school students in my home state of New York those final exams are a unique experience—because for all the standard academic courses, the state produces those final tests. The New York State Regents exams—as they’re known—have their advantages. For generations they have served as a quality control on the way courses from algebra, to French, to history are taught. But they also put a certain pressure on teachers and students, and so in many cases the last weeks of the year are given over entirely to review.

Some teachers take a different approach, however—instead of cramming it all into those final weeks, they review a little bit all the time. One great way to do that in a subject like physics, which I taught, is to slip a couple of review questions into every test all year. It might lead to a little whining from the students, but it's a great way to keep them on their toes.

In the calendar of the church year today is known as Trinity Sunday. It's not the end of the Christian year—that won't come until November—it's more like the midpoint. It is also a great time to review. Every year through Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost we re-trace the biblical drama of salvation from the birth of Jesus to the birth of the church. Trinity Sunday serves as the capstone to it all. So in a sense today is a day to review—to pause and

look back to see how we've gotten here, and to see the footsteps of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at every point along the way.

One of the chief reasons why Christians have come to believe in a God who is three-in-one and one-in-three, is because that is how Christians have always experienced God. We can see this in Scripture in passages like this morning's reading from John. But rather than look at this as a lesson in Trinitarian arithmetic, I'd like to approach it in a more straightforward manner.

As John tells the story of Jesus, this episode comes shortly after Jesus has begun his public ministry. He's done it in a way that has attracted a lot of attention and raised a lot of eyebrows. Chapter 2 of John begins with Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana in Galilee, and it ends with him throwing the moneychangers out of the temple in Jerusalem, along with doing many other "signs" – as John likes to call them.

One of the people who were impressed by Jesus was Nicodemus. John describes him as a Pharisee, and a "leader of the Jews"—which probably means that he was a member of the Jewish ruling council, known as the Sanhedrin—the same group that would ultimately put Jesus on trial and condemn him to death. Something about Jesus has made Nicodemus curious, and so he comes to Jesus to sound him out. It's not really apparent what has motivated him. It seems unlikely that he's an official envoy from the council. Since he comes to Jesus at night, seems like he's trying to keep this meeting on the "down-low." And he seems to choose his words very carefully. He says to

Jesus, ""Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one could perform the signs you are doing if God was not with him."

His cautious language may be more than just a matter of diplomacy – he's obviously trying to figure Jesus out. And so he falls back on what he knows. But the truth is that Jesus is like no one he's ever seen before. He calls Jesus "rabbi" and "teacher" and says his miracles are a sign that God is with him—but none of those words can do him justice.

In other words Nicodemus does what we do when we meet someone who doesn't fit any of the categories we ordinarily put people in—the boxes we tick off when we describe them. Things like gender and race and age. Or the boxes of nationality, religion, or political affiliation.

There's a part of us that seems to need those lists and boxes to help us simplify and organize the complexity of the world. But our lists and boxes can also become blinders. In Nicodemus' case they might have kept him from recognizing that he was talking face to face with the Son of God.

I think we may be able to have a little empathy for Nicodemus—because this is a very human way of approaching the world. In the 1600s, Sir Isaac Newton presented the world with his three laws of motion that provide a very simple and elegant model for how everything from ping pong balls to planets move. But from the beginning, everyone knew that it wasn't quite that simple—Newton's world didn't have pesky things like air or friction. Still, by doing a lot of fancy math, you make things fit into Newton's boxes.

But as time went on, by the late 1800s, careful observers began to find so many things that wouldn't fit into Newton's laws—even with all the fancy math—that it provoked kind of a crisis. But when Albert Einstein came along and offered a new way of looking at things, he was denounced by many of his fellow scientists and condemned by fundamentalist Christians. All of this is to say that our lists and boxes are hard to move beyond—even when they don't seem to work. And especially when accepting some new way of looking at things is going to call for major changes in our lives.

But while Nicodemus tries to keep Jesus in his familiar, boxes, Jesus breaks the conversation wide open by saying something that seems to come completely out of thin air: “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

For many Christians, this verse may be the most important verse in the Bible, after John 3:16—a verse that has found its way on to countless buttons, and bumper stickers and billboards. Others find themselves put off by it—in large part because of all those buttons and bumper stickers and billboards.

As with many things that sound simple, there's actually more to these words than meets the eye, starting with how to translate them into English. The challenge is that the Greek word John uses can mean born “again” or “anew”, but can also be born “from above”. And translators always seem to think that they need to make a choice.

And so, some Christians have come to put the emphasis on the “again.” For them this new birth from God can only happen as a single conscious experience – to be a real Christian a person must have a definite spiritual birthday, like I did, for instance, on April 26, 1974 when I responded to an invitation at a youth retreat and received Jesus as my Savior. Other Christians have put the weight on the “above.” In the extreme case, some believe that this spiritual birth happens when an infant is baptized—practically removing any sense of a personal experience of faith at all.

These different approaches can distract us from what Jesus is saying when he talks about this new birth from above. To circle back to some things I said last week—it really begins with some very basic biblical teaching about what it means to be human. Going way back to the creation story in Genesis, when the Lord breathed the breath of life into a lump of clay and it became a living person, to be human has always been more than to be a biological organism of the species *Homo sapiens*. And that something more is a spiritual connection with God. To be truly alive is to be alive to God.

John says in the prologue to the gospel, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:12-13 NRSV) Paul describes it this way in the second chapter of Ephesians, “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, ... but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved

us ... made us alive together with Christ." (Ephesians 2:1,4-5 NRSV) This new birth, this reconnection with God is a work of God's grace, shown to us in Jesus Christ, made alive in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

When it comes to what that ought to look like, we need to listen to how Jesus describes the ways of the Spirit. He says to Nicodemus in verses 7 and 8, "You should not be surprised at my saying [things that don't make sense like]," 'You must be born again [from above].' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

In those pre-scientific times, the ways of the wind were a total mystery. No one could explain it, no one could see it, but they could certainly feel it and see the evidence of its work. Jesus says that this is the way of the Spirit. We can't explain God's ways of working—there is always an element of mystery to God's ways. But at the same time, we can recognize when God's Spirit is present and at work.

We shouldn't expect the work of the Holy Spirit to be neat and orderly, and we should resist the temptation to try to make it that way. I must be humble and open enough to accept that your experience of God doesn't have to look like mine, and vice versa. We must have hearts and minds open to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in places and people that don't conform to our lists and fit into our boxes.

This ability to recognize where the Spirit moves has been one of the things that has helped break Christians out of our boxes. In the book of Acts, when Peter saw that Gentiles had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, he found it impossible to deny that Jesus has included them in his family. It's one reason that lay Christians have often come together in worship and mission, despite the policies of church hierarchies that seek to build walls. It's a major reason why many Christians, including our Presbyterian Church (USA) and Pope Francis apparently, find it hard to automatically write gay and lesbian folks out of the Christian community. As the Pope likes to put it, who are we to deny fellowship with anyone who has clearly been born of the Spirit?

Coming full circle, this is Trinity Sunday. The essence of this day is that the God who gives us a new birth from above in the Spirit cannot be fully comprehended or explained. And so may we embrace this mystery of faith. There is a place in for sound doctrine and good church order, but we must always recognize that God's ways are beyond our human capacity to understand.

"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." Amen.

*Rev. David Spaulding
First Presbyterian Church, Dixon
May 27, 2018*