

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, "DO IT AGAIN?"

John 3:1-17

February 20, 2005

Maybe you have had a friend or a relative ask you at some point whether you are a Christian.

"Yes," you respond, "I am."

"But are you born again?" they press.

You are dumbfounded. You do not know what they mean. A puzzled look spreads like a contagion over your face. Sensing your weakness and bewilderment, they pounce, "To be saved, you have to accept Jesus Christ into your heart as your personal Lord and Saviour" (a pause) "Have you accepted him? Would you like to?"

In such a brief conversation, your entire faith has been questioned and torn down. You no longer feel that your Lutheran faith is real or valid, and the life you have been living and all the church services you have ever attended have been a waste of time.

In your moment of weakness, your "friend" invites you to go with him to his or her church, attend a prayer meeting or Bible study and promises that by doing so, you will get the answers to the questions which have just been raised.

What follows is a process of dredging up old sins and mistakes. Each error of the past needs to be confessed,

grieved, and regretted. Guilt needs to be worked up and brought to the surface.

Only then can a person be ready to "Take it all to Jesus." "Receive Jesus into your heart" and feel the forgiveness and love of the Holy Spirit take all your sins away.

Often this is done at the front of some church with a pastor laying hands on people's heads while the organ softly plays "I have decided to follow Jesus" in the background. Often this experience is accompanied by crying and weeping and the arms of others reaching out to offer hugs and affection.

For some churches, this is the process of being born again, but it is not the experience for Lutheran churches. Does this mean that we are wrong?

Some churches take this passage very seriously. They use it to argue that faith cannot just allow us to go on with life as usual. Faith must make a difference in our lives. It must be something as radical to our existence as being born. This is what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus.

At the same time, Jesus is also saying that this process of being born can't be planned or scripted. Being "born from above" is not a planned pregnancy. It has to be an "accident."

It does not come about through studying the Bible or dredging up past sins, although these things can be useful and valuable in their own right.

Jesus has this conversation with Nicodemus to point out that faith demands that we not try to control God or our own recreation; it is God who gives birth to us!

For this reason, John has Jesus using a pun. The Greek word is *ανωθεν*, "anoethen". It usually means "from above" or "from the top". In John's Gospel, it invariably means "from heaven". But within the language of John's day, this word can also mean "from the beginning" or "from the start" and it is this meaning of again that Nicodemus seems to fixate on. What follows is a bit of a Laurel & Hardy "Who's on first?" routine as Nicodemus keeps asking "How can a man be born again?" while Jesus tries to point out that the Kingdom requires us not to be born again, but to be "born anew."

When Nicodemus asks, "How can anyone be born a second time," Jesus responds by saying that it is not in our power to choose our birth or the time or method of our birth.

"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."

Birth is a gift from God. It is not something we can plan for. It is not something we can work or study towards. It *is* a life-transforming event, but it is not an

event of our choosing or in our control. In this sense, it is every bit like birth.

For those who are conservatives or fundamentalists or who like to call themselves "Evangelicals" this is hard to understand. It is hard for Lutherans to understand as well.

As Lutherans, we understand that we can't control the process of conversion. That is why we believe it is proper to baptize infants. Just as babies cannot make a conscious choice to be born, they also are at the mercy of God's grace and love when it comes to their salvation. Infant baptism reminds us all that forgiveness of our sins is a free gift from God. It is not something that we deserve, not something that we can earn, not something that we can work or strive towards.

But as Lutherans, we often overlook the fact that it should make a difference in our lives. As Lutherans we are very good about saying what we believe but very bad at believing it.

We are quick to point to an event that happened ten or twenty or forty or seventy years ago and say that we are saved because we were baptized. But sometimes when we look deep within ourselves we don't feel very baptized. We don't feel very Christian. We don't even feel saved. This is too bad.

Luther, in the first of his 95 theses says that “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent,’ he called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

Baptism is a permanent sign and seal of God’s love and the offer of salvation, but conversion and rebirth are really to be daily events in the life of Lutherans. Every day we should be pondering anew what wonderful things God has done in our life today and every day we should be asking God to root out the evil in our lives and draw us closer and closer to him. Each day we should feel ourselves growing and maturing as Christians. This too is part of being “Born from above.”

Luther in the Large Catechism teaches:

“Therefore let everybody regard his Baptism as the daily garment which he is to wear all the time. Every day he should be found in faith and amid its fruits, every day he should be suppressing the old man and growing up in the new. If we wish to be Christians, we must practice the work that makes us Christians. But if anybody falls away from his Baptism let him return to it...As we have once obtained forgiveness of sins in Baptism, so forgiveness remains day by day as long as we live, that is as long as we carry this old Adam about our necks. (Part 4: p. 446. para 84ff).

It is a tough question to have someone ask you if you have been born again, but it is not a bad question. It is a question which should give us pause to think, but it certainly should not be something which leaves us tongue-tied and speechless.

Our new birth from above is a gift for which we can only say “Thank-you.” It is not something we chose. It is not something we worked for. It is not something we accepted or opened ourselves up to receive.

But living in our new faith as Christians, like any relationship, is a daily process of growing, and praying and working to be more holy and more loving to God and one another.