

## ***“How Can One Who is Old Be Born Again?”***

***Amos 7:7-17; John 3:1-7***

July 14, 2019

These first few verses of John 3 represent a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus: a renowned Teacher of Israel, who comes at night, in the darkness, so his colleagues won't know he has actually approached Jesus, the radical leader from Nazareth. Now they are face to face. Regardless of the close proximity, they are not having the same conversation. They are talking across each other. Jesus is using slippery words that have double meanings to him and only singular ones to Nicodemus. *Anothen* (anew) means “again” and “from above.” It has a time *and* a spiritual reference. Nicodemus can only comprehend the time: How can one be born a “second time” from the mother's womb? They cannot. That is not what Jesus means. Because they were having a conversation but not using the same language, so to speak, effective communication did not happen.

For Jesus, he is speaking clearly. “Unless one is born of water and the spirit, that one cannot enter the Kingdom of God.” So he adds “water,” and we translate being “born again” into baptism. Now *we* aren't having the same conversation with Jesus, because in John, water is not the River Jordan or the refreshing water we pour into the baptismal font every Sunday. In John, Jesus is talking about the Living Water of the Holy Spirit, the invigorating breath of Almighty God that we need to process through our bodies every moment we live, the intentional and ever-growing wisdom that gives us purpose, meaning, and direction for walking the paths of Righteousness. We receive the Sacrament of Baptism once - which sets us on a journey of discovering God's love, enriching our faith, and sometimes - repeating our sins until we reach true repentance: turning ourselves away from evil and washing ourselves clean from our miserable mistakes. None of that can be accomplished with one immersion into or being sprinkled by whatever water we chose. So mere baptism, as powerful and overwhelming as that experience is, does not have us speaking the same language either.

Can we reach the level of the conversation with Jesus where he invites us to be born of water and the Spirit, relinquishing our human drive for independence and relying utterly on the grace of God to make us whole? Do you want to have that conversation...?!

Here is a profound example of one immersed in God's Spirit throughout a horrendous experience. As a theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reputation evolved largely on the vision forged in the confinement of his last years and disclosed in letters smuggled to his friend, compiled and published in 1951: *Prisoner for God: Letters and Papers from Prison*. He outlined the need for a new “religionless Christianity,” a way of talking about God in a secular language appropriate for a “world come of age.” Even though that was a generation ago, we are still striving to break open horizons for a “world come of age.” He believed traditional religious language tended to posit a stop-gap deity occupying a “religious” realm on the boundaries of day-to-day life. Instead, Bonhoeffer wrote: “I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the center, not in weaknesses but in strength; and therefore not in death and guilt but in the life and goodness of humanity. . . . God is the beyond in the midst of our life. The church stands, not at the boundaries where human powers give out, but in the middle of the village.”

To be born again of the Spirit of God, is to continually avail ourselves to the challenging/rewarding, draining/fulfilling immersions into the Living Waters, the chaos of Mission. I feel inspired with how well and often you do that here at Cook's Memorial. A few weeks ago, when the people living down Harwood Road on the banks of the overflowing Catawba River were struck by emergency - you provided shelter, food, and clothing for neighbors whose homes were flooded and all their possessions were either ruined or washed away. Whenever you have the opportunity, you take children from Barium Springs for a day on the lake to enjoy the thrill of baiting, waiting, and catching wild fish! That is a pretty remarkable experience for children and orphans caught up in crises. Barium Springs was founded in 1883 by two Presbyterian women from Charlotte,

and recently merged with another community from the mountains to establish the Children's Hope Alliance. Their heritage speaks well of their commitment to providing educational and therapeutic services for children who have suffered complex trauma. They believe their future is bright with their deeply-rooted mission, which many of you support.

As you know, another group of nine of us, Gaye and I from Cook's and others from the community who are special friends now, recently returned from an immersion experience with the children in Kajiado. We were received with great enthusiasm as our big van arrived. The children sang and danced up to us as we entered, eager to touch our hands and faces and to issue greetings of "God bless you, We Love You!" Others of you who have visited can remember the innocence, appreciation, and generous hospitality they exude. I especially selected the phrase from The Brief Statement of Faith that reminds us of how Jesus blessed the children who trusted and approached him. Very often, as the children at Kajiado approached us, they bowed their heads, so that we might place our hands on them in greeting and in blessing. Sixty-seven children from ages 4 to 18 years old live, study, play, and work together - sharing, the older ones taking care of younger ones, and thanking God for their blessings. Thanks to Cook's Memorial, the water they carry to their dorm is much closer, and thanks to all your gifts, the children have new clothes, sports equipment, school supplies, and book bags.

Do the children along the Catawba River, at Barium Springs, and at Kajiado have different needs? Yes, they certainly vary some. Does God love and care for any of these children more than the others? Absolutely not. Whenever and wherever we go out into the world with the intention of sharing God's love, and receiving an immeasurable bounty of grace and inspiration, we give witness to the One who gives all of us the gift of abundant life. Our faith is continually nurtured as we are born again and again and again through the power of what the Holy Spirit can achieve through us.

We have guests today who were also immersed into the love and joy of these particular friends in Kajiado, Kenya. I invite them to come forward now to help illustrate our story.