Every time I hear this Gospel I am reminded of what a problem I have with the phrase, “born again.”

Ever since the early seventies, it has been a litmus test for “true believers” and “real” Christians. If you couldn’t lay claim to having been “born again”, then to many people you were a sub-standard Christian. Being “born again” became a square to check off: “born again…” “speak in tongues…” a formulaic code phrase associated with a style of Christianity that is triumphant and exuberant and seems to have little room for ambiguity or doubt or people going through dark and difficult times.

Well, back in the ’70’s I was one of those people going through a dark and difficult time, and I’ve got to tell you… there’s nothing worse than going through a time of darkness and pain and entering one of those “happy churches” with grinning clergy and smiling ushers and everything so positive and wonderful and grand and glorious! There’s an exaggeration about it, a level of emotional dishonesty and stylization about it, that’s not too far removed from professional wrestling; and one is made to feel slightly guilty if everything in your life is not wonderful. As the late and great Southern author Walker Percy, once quipped in his classic novel, The Second Coming, “If this is what being born again is about, I think I’ll wait until the third time around.”

But the real problem with the phrase goes much deeper: If I can just go down to some church and get myself born again, where does that leave God? You see, folks talk about being born again as if it’s a matter of choice… as if we have some kind of control over it.

....Which, of course, is consistent with what many of us have been taught: that we are the masters of our own destiny... “I choose, therefore I am.” We are told that God loves and cares--mainly about me, about my family, about my felt needs. This is a god who is moderately helpful and never disruptive; but this urbane, noninterventionist, therapist of a god never actually gets around to doing much. Our culture has a way of making God very small.

As far as I can tell, Jesus never said anything about being born again. Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus and thought he was talking about being born again, but what Jesus said was, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Which is an entirely different thing.

It’s significant that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. He’s a Pharisee, a theologian, and a member of the Sanhedrin. His religious credentials are impeccable; yet he comes to this backcountry preacher under the cover of darkness.

Could it be that he wants to question Jesus safe from public gaze? Is he afraid to let his fellow Pharisees know of his curiosity in Jesus? He begins his conversation with Jesus by saying, "We know . . . " Who is this "we"? Undoubtedly it is the people in the know, the people in power, the "informed reader," the "intelligent lay-person," "the hard-working, self-actualized spiritual people."

"We know that you have come from God..." Nicodemus says. Perhaps it’s a compliment. Maybe it is a trap. Jesus has been doing some strange things along with some miraculous things. If Nicodemus
can get Jesus to say, "Yes, I have come directly from God," then he can show Jesus to be an arrogant pretender. (It must be said that later in John’s Gospel, when Jesus is being attacked by his accusers, Nicodemus comes to Jesus’ defense, but that’s another story for another time.)

Not only does Jesus not get drawn into his question, but he also gives a response that doesn’t seem to fit the question, with talk about being “born from above” (John 3:3).

The whole thing hits Nicodemus like a riddle. How could somebody be born after growing up and growing old?

Here is this learned man trying to figure out Jesus, and Jesus implies that he is not to be figured out, or at least figured out for our own devices.

And then Jesus starts talking about wind:  “The wind blows where and when it will… you may hear the sound of it but you don’t know where it comes from…”

We can no more control the wind than we can choose to be born. The only way we can get into this kingdom of Jesus’ is “from above”… by the “spirit” (pneuma) … two experiences that come to us as gifts.

In other words, Jesus is saying that our relationship to God is primarily something God does, rather than something we do. This is a hard lesson for hard working, do-it-yourself, self-actualized, modern folks like us to learn.

James Finney, who wrote a book called, Merton’s Palace of Nowhere, went to study spirituality and prayer under the great monk and scholar, Thomas Merton. Finney tried hard to improve his prayer life. Then Merton led Finney to see that prayer was as much a matter of receiving God as doing something to get to God:

“Merton told me once to quit trying so hard in prayer. He said: 'How does an apple ripen? It just sits in the sun. A small green apple cannot ripen in one night by tightening all its muscles, squinting its eyes and tightening its jaw in order to find itself the next morning miraculously large, red, ripe, and juicy beside its small green counterparts. Like the birth of a baby or the opening of a rose, the birth of the true self takes place in God's time. We must wait for God, we must be awake; we must trust in God's hidden action within us.'”

I confess that too many of my sermons have as their unstated subtext: “Here is what you need to do (or here is how you need to think) in order to get yourself right with God.” But what if we are unable to get ourselves right with God? What if there is no way for us to right our relationship with God by what we do, think, or believe?

What if it’s really true---as the church has traditionally told us---that our relationship with God is not based upon our will power but rather comes as a gift, as grace, as something that God gives rather than what we achieve?
You may remember last summer I quoted rather extensively from Lauren Winner’s book, *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*. You may remember that in that book Ms. Winner describes how experiences of loss and failure unexpectedly slam her into a wall of doubt and spiritual despair. She confesses that her belief had faltered, her sense of God’s closeness had grown strained, her efforts at living in accord with the call of the gospel had become undone.

After months and months---in fact, years---she begins to see the other side of it. And she describes the other died of it not as some victorious mountain-top experience, but rather a life lived in the middle of faith, a *middling* life, as it were, a life lived by just keeping on keeping on... by putting one foot in front of the other, and trusting that somehow God is in there. And it is from this perspective... of having gone through the wringer... that she says,

“Some days, I am not sure if my faith is riddled with doubt or whether, graciously, my doubt is riddled with faith.... I am not a saint. I am, however, beginning to learn that I am a small character in a story that is always fundamentally about God.”

I would suggest that she’s describing an experience of being born from above. The God who gave us our first birth shall, from on high, and to our utter surprise, birth us again and again and again until we are the creatures whom God intends us to be.

And that’s the way we can tell the difference between the true, living God and a dead, false god. A fake, noninterventionist god will never surprise you.

Only God can save. Only God can birth us from above.... By the Spirit. Only God can make our lives turn out right. Only God can do something about the problem between us and God.

---

I am grateful to Bishop Will Willimon for some ideas contained in this sermon and gleaned from “Pulpit Resource”; Volume 39, Number 1, Year A, January-March, 2011; and Volume 42, Number 1, year A, January-March, 2014.