

HOLY TRINITY SUNDAY (Monday Sermon)

Isaiah 6:1-7; John 3:1-15

*You must be born again.*

*“I tell you the truth,”* Jesus says, *“no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”* And it’s important that He says born again, not tweaked or given a facelift. Not even an extreme makeover will do; we need to be born again. God, who made us *“very good”* in the beginning, must start again from scratch, not because He messed things up, but because we have. Is it Ford’s fault when you drive your new car into a tree? Is it Zenith’s fault when your kid throws a toy at your new TV’s screen? Is it Motorola’s fault when you drop your new cell phone in the water? And in all of those cases, some duct tape and glue and a battery aren’t going to do the job. It’s time to start from scratch.

*“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”* You were there for your first birth, but I bet you don’t remember it, so let me assure you it was bloody, it was quite the ordeal, the process. The same is true of our second birth. Before we could even think about being born again, however, we had to have something into which to be born: a family. Unfortunately, our family, like our Ford, had seen better days, that is, our relationship with our Father was anything but roses. And that is why Christ was standing here before Nicodemus. He had come to carry out the bloody process of bringing peace to the Family of God.

*“‘Woe to me!’ [Isaiah] cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.’”* This is no Garden of Eden we live in. Every day we are reminded of that. We live in a fallen world. People hurt those they claim to love and love what can only hurt them. Everywhere there is bickering or bellowing or betrayal. We can hardly answer the phone or the door without wondering, “What now?” We’re reduced to signing papers in order to trust anyone, even then knowing that paper is only as good as the lawyer who gets his hands on it. And the worst part is, as Isaiah says, that we don’t only live among an unclean people; we are unclean people, with unclean lips and wayward hearts. Even when God looked down on the world after the flood, when only righteous Noah and his family were living, even as He promised not to destroy the earth again in such a way, He

couldn't help but repeat what He had bemoaned before the Flood took place, as He said, *“Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood.”*

We aren't merely witnesses of the train wreck our world has become. No, we are active participants; part, not of the solution, but of the problem. Much of the filth that fills the gutter in which humanity sleeps in drunken stupor has brimmed over from our own hearts. Jesus makes the problem clear in Matthew 15: *“What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean... But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander”* (11,18,19). We don't need a stint or bypass or a catheterization or a pacemaker. We need a new heart. We need a new birth. But how?

But *“‘how can a man be born when he is old?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!’”* And it's true, isn't it. It was hard enough getting us out; there is no way any of us are going back into Mom's womb. Nicodemus asks a fair question. Reason, science, everything would seem to be on his side. But Jesus had said, *“I tell you the truth,”* that is, *“Amen. Amen.”* in the Greek. He isn't talking fallen reason here. He's speaking new creation. He's speaking, *“Let there be.”* Before creation the argument could have been made that nothing couldn't become something, but look what happened with that.

Do you all remember when you first decided to be conceived, first decided to born? No, I'd doubt it. As you probably reminded Mom more than once, you never asked to be born. You were born. Mom and Dad kind of worked all the conceiving and being born stuff out on their own initiative and, maybe or maybe not, according to their own schedule. Such is also the case with our second birth. We are born again. We don't get ourselves born again. We are born again. We are born again of water and Spirit even as were born of Mom and Dad. It's something that happens to us, sometimes whether we like it or not.

*“Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips;*

*your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.*” Christ had come to put things right with the Family. By His death and resurrection, the path was cleared for a reunion, as mankind was reconciled to the Father through the Son. He whom we hated according to our old man could now adopt us as new men and women, born again in the waters of Holy Baptism. Just as the coal that cleansed Isaiah’s unclean lips was taken from the altar—a coal used to consume the sacrifice for sin here also used to cleanse the sinner—so also Christ’s sacrifice is applied to us. Most similarly, it is placed on our lips in the Lord’s Supper, where, just as the LORD’s messenger told Isaiah, *“Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for,”* so also the Lord’s messenger tells us, *“Depart in peace, your sins are forgiven.”*

*“I tell you the truth,”* Jesus says, *“no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”* We’ve established that you don’t remember your first birth, and, even if there were a video, I bet you wouldn’t want to see it. But, even though you don’t remember it, it most certainly took place. Such is the case with your second birth. You may or may not remember it. Perhaps you had some grand moment of epiphany or were baptized as an adult, but for many of us our new birth was as forgettable as our first. But not remembering it doesn’t make it any less important. You don’t remember your first birth, but you live it every day, don’t you? So, whether or not we remember our second birth, let us live it just as well, rather, even better.

*“You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ 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.”* We cannot see the wind, but we can see the effects of the wind. May the Spirit, breathed into us through the Gospel, leave clear signs of its presence in our wake as well! We can do nothing to be born again. That is the gift and work of God. But we’d be fools not to want to climb out of the crib someday. *“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*

Perhaps you’re familiar with Hank Williams, Jr.? If you like his music, you’re no doubt familiar with his song *Family Tradition*. He sings that when he’s up to no good he’s just carrying on the family tradition. And that is the family tradition of the old man, the sinful nature we’ve

inherited from our first and fallen parents. But that is not who we are in Christ. The sacrifice on the altar of Calvary has been applied to us by the Lord's messengers. We have been born again of water and the Spirit. We've been adopted into a new and holy Family, the divine mystery of the Holy Trinity, three Persons in one God determined to save and preserve us. Let's carry on that family tradition. Let's sing of our *"new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"* (1 Peter 1:3). Amen.