

February 17, 2008

Micah 6.6-8  
John 3.1-17

### WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO SIN?

New minister to Kentucky church: preached against tobacco, liquor, gambling on successive Sundays.

Church I grew up in: no neckties, jewelry, movies, card playing (rook)  
No dancing, but skating was OK

Puritans: Christmas!

George Carlin: eating meat on Friday was a sin; things changed & now it is OK. He wonders about all those who ate meat before and are serving time!

Small college in Indiana used to advertise that their campus was 20 miles from the nearest sin!

INSERT: Lists of “sins;” And, of course, the 10 commandments: no idols, no murder, no stealing, no coveting, no swearing, no adultery, no false witness. What crosses your mind as you pray that part of the Lord’s Prayer: “forgive us our sins?” Do you think only of personal shortcomings? Ever consider what “our” might mean as a nation, as a culture, as a society?

But what about SIN? Singular? For it seems that sins in the plural change over the course of generations. “Sins” in the plural are so much easier to see in others, resulting in a JUDGEMENTAL attitude and a sense of self-righteousness---attitudes that gave Jesus the most trouble!

Greek word for sin is translated as “missing the mark.” What is the “mark?” What do you think Jesus meant when he used the word “sin?”

In our lesson today, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “You must be born again from above.” And just like Nicodemus, most people have trouble understanding just what that means. What does it mean for you?

I begin with what seemed to be the core of Jesus’ teaching: The Kingdom of God. What makes this so confusing is that Matthew used the “Kingdom of Heaven.” Matt was a good Jew, and Jews did not say or write the word “God.” They would say or write “Lord” instead. This is still true today among Orthodox Jews and even some conservative Jews. Matthew substitutes Heaven for God.

With a focus on Heaven, many Christians get side tracked by thinking of the afterlife and what should be done or not done to get there. And since God is rich in mercy and forgiveness, “sins” can be forgiven to keep that final door open. To confess and ask forgiveness for our wrongs is certainly appropriate and necessary in our journey of faith. Before Protestant Reformation the church took advantage of this. Some Protestant churches still do: threatening with the loss of heaven and eternal punishment of hell.

When we look at the Kingdom of God, however, we see a different emphasis. This focus is on the reign of God: the rule of Justice and Righteousness and compassion. And Jesus told Nicodemus that one had to be “born again from above” to understand what all of that means! And I would say that for most of us we may have to be born again, and again, and again!

Let us look at our own American history to see what I am getting at.

Although many of the founding fathers were opposed to the sin of slavery, look how long it took to ban this inhuman relationship. Look how long it took for many decent Christians to finally see and to understand that slavery was wrong—to be born again from above.

Although Jesus treated women equally and Paul wrote that in God’s Kingdom there is neither male or female, look how long it took for decent Christians to wake up, to be born again from above, to allow the equality of voting, of careers, of preaching.

Although we banned slavery, look how long it took for decent Christians to be born again from above, to insist that the vote belongs to every single citizen regardless of race; that the freedom to live and to work where one chooses belongs to every person.

Even though there are laws and changes in attitude, slavery still exists, women and members of races other than Caucasian are often treated as second class citizens. There is still hope that more and more decent Christians and other citizens will “be born again from above.”

Slowly, Christians have realized that homosexuality is not a choice, that our gay & lesbian community deserves to be treated with justice and kindness. This new birthing process has been long in coming; it is a greater struggle for some Christians than others to understand, to be welcoming, to see the need for equal rights.

As a nation of immigrants, we also struggle as to how to do justice and kindness to present day immigrants. Is it surprising to you that many of those who live closest to our southern borders were the first to be “born again from above,” to be welcoming and protecting, who want justice and kindness for these strangers who seek a better life?

Several years ago the Christian Century ran articles entitled, “How I changed my Mind.” I know many of you could write such an article as you have looked back on your life. You can see the places where you were “born again from above.” I know that I can. In a male, Caucasian, heterosexual protestant dominated culture, it has been a struggle at times. It has taken study, listening, questioning, re-reading the Bible—putting up the plumbline of love to see who God loves and accepts unconditionally.

Back to Nicodemus. Here was a good man: a Pharisee who was a leader. He had a concern for justice and kindness. Do you think that he was on the way to being “born again from above?” John closes his Gospel story with reference to Nicodemus as one who took Jesus’ body down from the cross for burial. He put his life in danger over a dead body to do what the law required for the dead. I like to think that he indeed was born again from above many times!

The apostle Paul was also a leader. He had a greater concern for the law until his rebirthing. His being “born again from above” was more dramatic. But he finally saw that Jesus’ Good News” was indeed for everybody, not just the Jewish people.

Simon Peter was one of Jesus’ most intimate disciples. But it took a rebirthing for him to see that God is no respecter of the divisions we make: he came to see that God’s love reached out to the non Jew, to those of other races. And this was after Jesus’ death!

Old Tom was a red necked cowboy rancher who was always giving his minister a lot of grief. Old Tom seemed to be against everybody that was different. Then one Sunday things changed. Old Tom came in early for Sunday worship and confronted his minister. “Preacher, last night I saw a news item about how poor these people were on some island and they had lost everything in a hurricane. I’m shipping some of my best cattle down to help them out.”

In my first parish Joe was my red neck! The church wanted to build a parsonage but had little money. I invited a black minister friend and his family’s construction crew in RI to come for a week and build it for us. They only asked that we put them up in a motel and feed them. Joe was the first to meet them; it didn’t take long for them to make friends with Joe. By the end of the week, Joe had welcomed them into his home for a meal. A year later he wanted me to take him to Rhode Island to be there for a celebration. Joe could neither read or write, but he was open to being “born again from above!” (This was in the 60’s—the middle of the Civil Rights Movement.) He died before he would have known that his only son was gay. I would guess that that would have been a harder birthing process for Joe—but then again he loved that son.

So what is sin? I propose that it is when we “miss the mark” as to what the Kingdom of God is all about: justice & righteousness, mercy & kindness, compassion. In Greek the word for repentance is “to turn around,” and for our theology it is so that we can again get a glimpse of aim for the “mark” of the Kingdom of God. Sin is to refuse.

How do we know when we need to “be born again?” I suggest that it is when we become aware that our attitudes toward self and others are negative. When we live with guilt and self deprecation, when we put others down, or we know we are prejudicial or judgmental—when those attitudes are off center to the plumb line of compassion. That is when the spirit is calling us to “be born again from above.”

