

Want A New Life?

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, June 7, 2009 John 3:1-17

On lazy summer days when I was a child, my brothers and I spent a lot of time with the neighbor kids. A couple of them were girls, which became interesting later on, but when we still pre-teens didn't really matter so much. In fact, one of the two girls was a real tom-boy, which made her seem especially cool. She would join in our baseball games and help us dig holes to trap gophers – she'd do just about anything a boy would do and she didn't mind getting dirty.

The girl up the road, on the other hand, was different. She was girly. Sometimes she couldn't come out to play because she was taking her piano lesson, or her mother was teaching her to sew. And she didn't like getting dirty. She would, however, occasionally consent to play with us boys as long as we played something "nice."

Something "nice" usually meant make-believe, or what we called "playing house." This meant we were all assigned roles – she was the mom, one of us boys was the Dad, and the rest were kids. She had a little playhouse in her yard and we would go through all the ordinary daily activities – cooking, eating, cleaning up, doing "pretend" homework.

None of us boys were too wild about this game, but we played along since it was something to do. To be honest, it wasn't so bad if you got to be one of the kids. You could "act up" and carry on – basically you could be the kind of brat you would never dare to be in your real family. The worst part was being the Dad. Remember, these were more traditional times. As the Dad, you ate breakfast, gave "mom" a peck on the cheek, and then left for "work." In other words, you had to go find some way to entertain your self for several minutes. Of course, at a certain age being the Dad and getting to give the Mom a peck on the cheek became much more appealing. But for some reason, that is just about the time we stopped playing make-believe.

In fact, I hadn't given make-believe much thought until the other day when I heard about its Internet incarnation. Over a million adults worldwide participate in something called "Second Life," or SL for short. SL is a virtual world where you can create an avatar (that's an animated 3-D version of yourself) and do just about everything people do in the real world. You can go shopping, go on vacation, or go to the movies. You can use the currency, Linden dollars, to buy make-believe land, and build a make-believe house.

People in this make-believe, virtual world marry and divorce, have kids, have pets, start businesses – you name it. There is even a church called Experience Island, where people meet and have conversations with each other about faith. The church part of SL is run by an actual church in Oklahoma!

Internet make-believe may not be your cup of tea – it isn't mine, either – but it is worth spending a little time thinking about why so many people are drawn to it. It is growing rapidly, and those who are involved are often keenly devoted to it. What's the draw? I think the answer is in the name – Second Life.

People want a second life, a different life. The life they are living isn't fulfilling for them. Maybe they feel boxed in or limited by circumstances in the “real” world. In Second Life, they can be whatever and whomever they want – a rock star, a pro athlete, a beauty queen, a beach bum – whatever!

Nicodemus, whom we met in our text this morning, might have been a prime candidate for Second Life, if it had existed when he was around. Though he was an esteemed Pharisee, something was missing – something so important that he would risk his reputation by going to see Jesus, someone the Pharisees as a group looked down upon. That's why Nicodemus limited his risk by going at night.

Nicodemus greets Jesus with flattery: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

But Jesus never has much time to listen to flattery. He knows why Nicodemus has come. He knows what Nicodemus wants. He knows what Nicodemus needs. So he says, “Very truly I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anothen.”

That's right, anothen. Anothen is the actual Greek word in the text, and it carries more than one meaning. Traditionally it has been translated, “again,” as in “born again.” But it could just as easily be translated “from above,” as in “born from above,” that is from God. Anothen, – again, from above – is what creates the confusion that leads to the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus.

Nicodemus chooses to understand it as “again” and to take it literally, which of course makes it impossible. As he says, “How can a person go back into his or her mother's womb and be born a second time? It is generally a mistake to take Jesus' words literally, especially in the

gospel of John. Seriously, yes; literally, no. Jesus speaks in images, parables, figures of speech. He calls himself “the Good Shepherd,” the “Bread of Life,” “the Light of the World.”

Jesus explains to Nicodemus that being born anothen – again, from above, take your pick, just don’t take it literally – is not just something you can add to your to-do list. It isn’t something you can make happen. It is something God does. You can resist or cooperate, but you can’t cause it or prevent it – kind of like being born literally, if you think about it. The kind of religion Jesus was talking about was so very different from the kind Nicodemus was accustomed to. Pharisees lived by the law, and were careful to apply it to even the most minute or seemingly insignificant matters. Perhaps you remember another conversation Jesus had in which he spoke of Pharisees being concerned about tithing even their herbs and spices – mint, dill and cummin. The underlying assumption is that what matters most in religion is what the people do. What matters most is that they do what they are supposed to do, the way they are supposed to do it, and when they are supposed to do it. Now, no one can claim that Jesus thought what people do doesn’t matter as far as God is concerned. His teachings in Matthew, Mark and Luke make that clear. The difference is simply that Jesus didn’t think that what people did (or didn’t do) was the most important thing. For Jesus, it was what God did that mattered most. It was God who causes the wind of the Spirit to blow into our lives.

That’s why Christianity really isn’t a very good religion for the kind of people who feel they need to control everything. Oh, there are plenty of people who see Christianity as a means of controlling the world, as moral policemen, or as a means of controlling the afterlife – that is, making sure you get to heaven and don’t go to hell. But that is a distortion of the message. That isn’t the way Jesus understood God at all. Quit trying to control everything – even God! – and start paying attention to what God is doing in the world. Notice. Open your eyes, your ears. Take part in it. Cooperate with it. If you feel inspiration, great – it is a gift. And if you don’t, just wait. It will happen when it happens.

The most difficult part of being an authentic follower of Jesus is adopting this approach to life. It is this business of letting God be God, and being content to let God set the agenda. It is the challenge of surrendering the desire to be in control, and accepting the will of God as our first priority.

On warm summer evenings, there is nothing my wife Kathy likes better than to be outside when there is a strong breeze blowing. Sometimes the

scent of flowers is carried by the breeze. Sometimes it smells like approaching rain. Always, it cools us off. We sit together for long minutes and say nothing. We simply enjoy the feel of it, the sensation of being alive. We receive it for what it is – a gift that we are given, not something we make happen.

And often I think about this story as I sit there, feeling the wind. I think about Nicodemus, desperate for a new life, a better life, a more fulfilling life. And I think about him coming to Jesus, wanting to know what to do, only to be told there was nothing he could do except wait for the wind to blow. Trust God to send the Spirit. Wait. Wait for it. Until the wind comes, there is nothing else you can do.

But when it comes, throw open your arms and take a deep, deep breath. Breathe it in. Let it become a part of you, and let yourself become a part of what God is doing. That is what salvation is.

Amen.