

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Holy Communion
Sunday Morning Service, 10:00am
March 5, 2023
The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“Born of Water and Spirit”
Christian Scripture: John 3:1-17



Credit: Como Lake United Church

So, here we are again at the table. Most of us have been here many times before. What can I do or say that might make what is offered here change you, change your life, for the better? Or for that matter, what can I do or say here that might enable my life to change for the better? I suppose not a whole lot. Because whether we are profoundly changed is not really up to us. We are not in control of what happens here. Jesus said to the Pharisee, Nicodemus, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you will hear the sound of it, but you will not know from where it comes or where it goes” (John 3:8). That was Jesus way of saying that you

cannot control the workings of the Holy Spirit in your life. No, we are not in control here. Only the Holy Spirit determines who, and when, is changed at this table.

Yet, at the same time, I suppose we can *prepare* ourselves to be changed. We can be open to be changed at this table. Simply being open to be changed, to be 'born again', to be 'born anew', to be 'born from above', is about all we can do.¹ But we must be honest with ourselves, we are not in control, and we are unable to 'do' anything to be born of the Spirit, born a second time.

Think about it. Seriously, think about it really hard. What did you *do* to be born of your mother; what did you *do* to be 'born of water'? What did you *do* as an unborn baby, floating in a sack of amniotic fluid for nine months, to be born? That's right. Nothing. When the time for your birth arrived, you had nothing to do with that sack of water bursting. Only your mother worked (or the surgeon in the case of a Cesarean section) when you were born in a rush of water, entering the world as a new creature.² I suppose all you did was 'not fight' it. I suppose all you did was 'not resist' it. I suppose the best you could do is to simply allow yourself to be born of water.

¹ All of these variations ('born again', 'born anew', 'born from above', and 'born of Spirit') are all synonymous translations and meanings.

² Got Questions (Your Questions. Biblical Answers), "What Does It mean to Be Born of Water". Found at: <https://www.gotquestions.org/born-of-water.html>, accessed March 5, 2023.

At this table the same holds true for the second birth of the Spirit as it did for the first birth of the water: I suppose the best we can do is not resist it. And yet so many of us do. Nicodemus resisted it. It says in the beginning of our scripture that Nicodemus came in the night, in the cover of darkness. He was embarrassed. He was afraid. From Nicodemus' hesitation, it's obvious from the Bible that being 'born again' does not always happen all at once. In fact, it most often happens gradually. Nicodemus disappeared from this story having shown no signs of greater comprehension or faith. Yet he reappears at two later points in John's gospel. In chapter 7 (45-52), he offered a somewhat hesitant defense of Jesus and in chapter 19 (38-42) he accompanied Joseph of Arimathea, named a secret believer, with an exorbitant amount of spices for Jesus' burial.³ So, for Nicodemus and for us, this 'being born again' may not be 'all-of-the-sudden', but rather gradual. Yet again, I'm not so sure Nicodemus did much to foster his second birth. I think he just had to be ready for it, open to it, not resist, not fight it.

Friends, I am convinced that you and I, as we approach this table, we need only to 'not resist being born again'. To be born of the Spirit, a second time, perhaps at most requires that we not fight it. There are many many ways we fight being born again.

³ David Lose, *Working Preacher*, "Commentary on John 3:1-17", March 20, 2011. Found at: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-31-17-2>, accessed March 5, 2023.

Some of us do not allow ourselves to grieve. We are all wounded. We all are hurting. And we are so full of grief, that there is no room for the Spirit of God to change us. It is O.K. to get help and to grieve.

Some of us fight being born again by refusing to let go of some resentment, blame, and anger. Sometimes we fight being born again by holding on to these sentiments that poison the vessel in which the Spirit wishes to dwell. We need to let these anchors go.

Finally, some of us resist being born again by refusing to accept ourselves as worthy. We need to forfeit this false belief that we are somehow 'less than'. You are not 'less than'. Friends, this table is open to all because all receive God's unconditional love and acceptance.

Friends, Jesus said, "What is born of flesh is flesh" (3:6). And we did nothing to be born of flesh. Except perhaps we did not resist it. Jesus also said "What is born of Spirit is Spirit" (3:6). And, again, we do nothing to be born of Spirit. Except perhaps the best we can do is simply not resist it. Being born the first time comes naturally because as infants we have not the wounds, the fears, and the doubts to cause us to resist our mother's pushes. But being born of the Spirit does not come so naturally nor all of the sudden for most of us because we resist this second birth. We oppose it.

To be changed at this table we need only remember that Moses set a serpent on a pole to heal the people of God bitten by life. Thereafter, they lived life anew (Number 21:9). To be changed at this table, we need only remember that the cross on which pain and wounds were afflicted became, through God's Spirit, a symbol of love and eternal life. From our grief, from our wounds, from our self-doubts comes new life if we don't fight it, if we don't resist it, and if we simply accept it. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".