

## ***Renewal!***

### **Genesis 12:1-4; John 3:1-17**

John Wesley wrote, "If any doctrines within the whole compass of Christianity may be properly termed fundamental, they are doubtless these two, -- the doctrine of justification, and that of the new birth."

A few months ago, my brother was in a car accident. Fortunately, no one was hurt. In fact, he was hit while sitting idle at a stop light! But, as anyone who has been involved in an automobile accident can tell you, the experience leads to endless documentation and telephone calls with insurance agents and claims adjustors and body shops. And so it was with him. He shared with me that in one conversation with the at-fault driver's insurance company about the damage to be repaired, the adjuster said, "This car has surely been in other accidents! At least two of the dents in the passenger door could not have been caused by this accident." The car, although certainly not new, had not been in other accidents and had no prior damage. After much discussion about this matter, it became clear that the insurance company would not pay for what they called "prior damage" and, therefore, would only approve a partial repair of the damage from the accident. As you can imagine, my brother was frustrated, and did not appreciate it when I laughed at the ridiculous situation.

His car would return from the body shop partially repaired because a portion of the damage had not been deemed "worthy" of a remake. Reflecting theologically while humored by the situation, I felt a profound sense of gratitude toward our God who does not function like insurance companies. However, it did get me thinking about God's relationship to body shops.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he knew enough to know that Jesus was offering a new kind of body repair. The temple, priests and traditions had for good Jews been the place to seek repair work. Now Jesus' language implied there was a new fix, a new kind of repair needed for the faithful. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night to check it out, beginning a private conversation, in which Jesus uses plural language, as if speaking to more than Nicodemus.

Jesus knows that he is talking to a larger crowd, is fighting a larger battle, than just an evening conversation with Nicodemus. Nicodemus represented a rigid kind of thinking about laws and traditions and rituals but also about the basic work of God. Jesus wonders how Nicodemus could be such a trusted teacher and not know the inner workings of God's Spirit, not know *the power of God's Spirit*. Nicodemus, and the Pharisees, had such clarity about the things of God that any entry of new ideas or expressions was too much to grasp. They seemed unable to bear the weight of the perceived consequences that might come from acceptance of thinking about the holy in such a way.

Returning to my brother's car...after several days in the body shop, the car was returned to my brother completely repaired, no sign of the dents the insurance company had deemed

unworthy of renewal. I laughed some more. My conclusion was that the guy at the body shop thought a lot more like God, and less like the insurance adjustor. You can't fix *almost* all of the damage! It must be completely remade! Or, as Jesus would say, "born from above." Partial renewal is no possible.

What Nicodemus had such a hard time understanding was the concept that God did not want a detailed inventory of every dent, scrape, and scratch on the hearts and lives of the faithful. What God wants is to remake each and every one of us. God doesn't demand a story behind each fender bender. God doesn't pick and choose which sins are forgiven and which ones remain. God gives us new birth with water and the Spirit and remakes us into new creations. Through this new birth, our relationship with God, through Christ, takes on a deeper and more complete meaning as the experiences of our lives are seen through the lens of God's gracious and forgiving work of love.

We cannot go back and re-do so many of our difficult trials and adversities in life: loss, addiction, disappointment, heartbreak. We are filled with guilt, regret, and longing. And we often want to hold tight to those feelings, even when God is ready to take them away, giving us a fresh start and a new paint job. Christ's sacrifice renews us, and makes us forgiven and whole people.

No, we cannot go back and wipe away our past. What we can do is be reborn of water and the spirit. Jesus doesn't promise to re-do our first birth. No, we don't climb back into our mother's wombs to be reborn. It is a different kind of birth--one that allows our spirits to overcome whatever blows the physical world has dealt us and live freely, fully remade, with knowledge and experience of the living God.

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message* translation of scripture, translates verse 17 with these contemporary words, "God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again."

Today, as we sing the next hymn, I invite you to come to the waters of renewal. Remember that in these waters God claims you, washes you of all sin, renews you and makes you whole. The dents and dings are gone and you are fully renewed.

*Please pray with me.* O God of the day and of the night, come to us with the power of your Holy Spirit. Give us new life by water and the Spirit. Remake, reshape, and renew us through your sacrificial love in Christ Jesus. Amen.