Sunday, May 4, 1986
BORN AGAIN AS CHILDREN
John 3:l-3; Mark 10:13-16

A term that is frequently used in the Christian faith is “Born Again”. To have a new birth is a New Testament concept, an experience that comes in a variety of ways to those who identify themselves as Christians. In the best use of the term, to be “born again” describes an individual whose life has been changed, either suddenly or gradually, because of Jesus Christ.

The phrase, “born again” or as the Revised Standard Version translation has it, “born anew,” is found in the Gospel of John in the story of a meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus. That brief story was read earlier as part of the scripture reading. Nicodemus, a Jewish religious and political leader, had heard about Jesus, perhaps had seen him. He was intrigued by him and his teachings. He also knew that Jesus was a controversial figure among the Jews. So he arranged to meet Jesus secretly at night. He didn’t want any of his friends or colleagues to know about the meeting. He had some questions he wanted to ask. Nicodemus was searching to discover God’s will.

Although we do not know exactly what questions he asked Jesus, we can infer what some of the questions were by the answers Jesus gave. Nicodemus had asked, “How can I tell if God is truly a part of my life?” Or perhaps he had phrased it another way, “How can I see more clearly that God is at work in the world and in my life?” Behind the questions was his search for more meaning and purpose and direction in his living. Jesus answered him by saying, “Unless one is born anew, he or she cannot see the kingdom of God.” Notice especially that Jesus said, “That person cannot see the kingdom of God.” One has to have a certain kind of vision which comes from a changed life before one can be aware of God in his or her own life and aware of God at work in the world.

The Gospel of Luke reports that one day a lawyer asked Jesus a similar question in a different way—"What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” In this case, Jesus asked the lawyer a question in return, “What is written in the law?” The lawyer answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” “You have answered right,” Jesus said, “Do this and you will live.” But then the lawyer asked the all-important follow-up question, “And who is my neighbor?” As an answer, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan to point out that any person in need is one’s neighbor, even people we don’t like, and that we are to love such people as much as we love ourselves and to love them means to be of help to them in some very practical ways — not just love in theory.

Then the Gospel of Luke, in another place, reports that one day another young man asked Jesus the same question, “Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to this man, “You know the commandments: Do not commit adultery, do not kill, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and your mother.” And the young man replied, “All these I have observed from my youth.” Then Jesus said, “One thing you still lack: sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me.” But when the man heard this, he became sad, for he was very rich. And he did not follow Jesus. The point is that Jesus calls us to be born anew in a number of ways. In each case, the same basic question was asked, but it got a different answer.

What puzzles me is that some people insist on building their whole case for becoming a Christian and following Jesus on the passage from the Gospel of John, where Jesus tells Nicodemus to be born anew, and that would be okay, but then they go on to say that each person needs to have a particular kind of new birth experience otherwise he or she cannot be considered to be a part of God's community.

But we could just as logically choose one of the other two incidents from the Gospel of Luke and say for example, that unless an individual sells all that he or she has and gives the proceeds to the poor, that person cannot be a part of God's community. Then we would not have born anew Christians, but "sell-all-you-have" Christians. There aren't too many of those around.

What we forget in all of this is that in each case, Jesus gave a specific answer to a specific person. He tailored his answer according to what was the barrier in that person's life.

But there's even more. In the second New Testament reading this morning from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells those who are in the crowd listening to him, "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." Here's another way to be born anew! To become like a child.

So, according to Jesus, to experience God's kingdom, or God's community, or God's presence in one's life and in the world, some people have to become more loving neighbors, some of us have to give away all we have, some of us have to have a new way of seeing and need a spiritual rebirth, and some of us have to become like children again. In fact, becoming like children again can be a spiritual rebirth. And some of us need all of those changes in our lives.

This morning, we are going to look more specifically at Jesus's suggestion of becoming like children. Some of us need to be born again as children. We're not talking here about being "childish," but about being "childlike."

In being childlike, Jesus found that almost perfect analogy for membership in God's community. "Look at this child in my arms," he said, "To such belongs the kingdom of God." "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

What then are some of these characteristics which children have and which we also need to have, no matter what our age, if we are to enter God's kingdom?

First of all, children have an active and creative imagination, which helps them to see things we do not see. A teacher described an experiment which he frequently uses. "If I held up a sheet of white paper and put a black dot on it with my pen, what would you see?" He has used this demonstration with thousands of adults in seminars, and invariably he gets the same answer: "A black dot." When he tried the same thing with a kindergarten class, a lot of hands went up, and the answers were many and different. "A Mexican hat," piped one youngster. "No, that's a burnt hamburger," said another. "A squashed bug," observed a third.
When we're young, we're naturally creative because we let our minds run free. But as we're taught to follow the rules, our thinking narrows. Now of course for much of life this can be a blessing. There are rules and guidelines which are very helpful. It wouldn't do to create a new way going home from work if it meant driving down the wrong side of the street, or going the wrong way on a one-way street just to be creative.

But in so many other areas of our lives, we lose, or forget, or put down the natural creativity and spontaneity we had as children. To be creative is to be in touch with God, the ultimate Creator. And we all have a certain amount of natural creative ability. It is a gift to each one of us from God. It is built into us. We can cover it up, or hide it, or suffocate it.

Unfortunately, as we grow older we tend to become more cautious and afraid. We become prisoners of a point of view. A child, on the other hand, being unconscious of rank or race, until he or she is taught differently, will not worry about color of skin or anything else. A king's child will gladly play with a ragman's child. But we adults often believe we can improve on God's ways.

Some of us get so set in our ways so early in life. Nothing is sadder than a person who is only in his or her thirties, but has not had, or been open to a new idea for years. And then our idea patterns become so difficult to change. No wonder Jesus said, "That whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

When Jesus calls us to be like children so that we can enter God's community, he is asking us to be open to new ways, to new ideas, to seeing the world and other people differently. We are to have the freshness of mind which is evident in a child. He is also asking us to have a sense of mystery and wonder about life, a sense that we do not know all there is to know about anything.

Someone described being open and creative in this way: "Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought."

Secondly, Jesus used the analogy of being like a child to enter God's community because a child knows the meaning of dependence and trust. A child looks to the parent for all that he or she receives. There is a trust that what is needed will be provided. Life is a gift. The world is a gift. Love is a gift. It's the kind of dependence and trust we are to have in God. Furthermore, for the child, neither social convention, nor money, nor status, nor ownership count. They have a different kind of understanding because their perception has not yet been blunted by compromise, fatigue, rationalization, and the mistaking of mere respectability for morality.

In the giving and receiving of gifts what counts for the child is the spirit in which something was given or received. For the adult, the expensive gift is often proof of deep love. For the child, until he or she is taught differently, judgment is from another point of view. Love's proof is intuitively perceived in the inspiration which has guided the giver.

Thirdly, Jesus invites us to become like children because of their sense of giving. From the earliest years, a child shows his or her joy in giving. He or she gives what they are able to give, a smile, a look, a kiss. As soon as the little hand can seize an object, a toy, the child holds it out and offers it to us. He or she may withhold it from someone who would keep it jealously. But the child will give generously to anyone who will get into the game of reciprocal giving. The child will give all that he or she finds. It is an act of regal love to pick a pretty flower and offer it to the father or mother. And in the game of hide and seek, which children enjoy so much, they pretend to hide only for the pleasure of giving themselves away again as they come out of their hiding places or are found. We grab them and hug them. The proof is in their happy outbursts. The supreme gift is the giving of oneself as the child instinctively knows.

Sometimes when we, as adults, are accused of being in our second childhood, we take it as an insult, and occasionally that's the way it is meant. But according to Jesus, there is a kind of second childhood that many of us as adults need. "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

When Jesus calls us to be like children, he is asking us to be open to new ways, to new kinds of seeing, to being creative, to not be afraid of new ideas, to have the freshness of mind which is evident in a child. He is also asking us to have a deep and basic trust in the goodness of God.

The basic point that Jesus is making is that all of us need to be as open as possible to receiving God's spirit into our lives. It is the center of all religion. Whether one calls it being "born anew" or "becoming like a child," or something else, is not important. The power is there and available, and we need it. Sooner or later we run into some situation which is difficult, tragic, perilous and that asks more of us, more power than life ever asked before. If God is with us, then life nor death will not defeat us. We need not crack up.

Too often for many of us, when we think of conversion, or of turning to God, we commonly think of prodigals suddenly turning homeward, or some other more spectacular, all of a sudden, change of direction. Such miracles of personal renovation do take place, but some of the most notable conversions are of another kind — church members or non-church members who have never doubted Christianity, who have for years been acquiescent in it and observant of its outward expression, who then make a great discovery — it works! It actually works! This is what the Bible means by entering God's kingdom, or entering eternal life. When translated into terms of daily life, it is a resource of inward power, overcoming fear, reinforcing courage, re-arranging one's life's priorities, making one an adequate personality equipped for life and living life joyfully, hopefully and creatively, and trusting ultimately in God who makes all things new! Amen.