

**Sunday, May 30, 2021**  
**Sermon: Who is God, Anyway**  
**Pastor Adam Ericksen**  
**Clackamas United Church of Christ**



About 15 years ago, I had one of the important and amazing experiences of my life. It was the birth of my first born son - my firstborn child. And we had made all kinds of preparations for this event mostly due to my wife who is always on top of things, where I am always chaotic and never know what to do. So, we had prepared for this event and knew around the date that this event would happen. The day finally came and we when got there, my wife wanted me to participate in many different ways during the birth of our child. We got into the room and the nurse said that there are times when the when the dad has turned white and fainted during this event. And I thought, I've prepared myself for this. I have watched some videos. I know what's going to happen. I'm going to be okay. I'm tough. I can handle this. Then I began to see some blood and things happening and I turned white. The nurses looked at me and said you go sit down, and I said okay. So then, I sat off in the corner.

The nurses said that sometimes dads think they can make it through the birth of their firstborn and then they can't, and they faint, and then all of the attention goes to the dad. Well, I didn't want to be another man who takes the attention away from important events, so I knew my place and I went and sat down. They called in a nurse to be a daddy nurse – I think that's what they called them in my mind. I needed the daddy nurse to come and help me through this moment that was full of intensity, full of pain, full of screaming, full of things that I was not prepared to go through. Isn't that what life often brings to us?

Fortunately, I had people in the room to help me through it, to help me find my place where I needed to be. And fortunately, there were people to help my wife through it, and my son through it, as well. And at the end, we had this newborn child who is now 15. Hard to imagine sometimes, but here we are. I tell you this story because it in some way relates to our passage today. The famous words that run throughout this passage in John Chapter 3, some of those famous words are what we've talked about already. For God so loved the world that God gave God's only son. This passage has often taken an emotional tone to it, or a tone of feeling to it. God so loved the world. Love in the Hebrew tradition for our Jewish siblings and for the early Christians is not so much based on a feeling that you have for others. Love is based on action. The question is not how much does God love the world, God loves the world infinitely. The question is what does God do. How does God act out of love when Jesus says that the greatest commandments are to love God and to love your neighbor as you love yourself. It does not mean to feel really good about your neighbor who just did bad things to you.

Sometimes those feelings are impossible to have. The point is, in love, you act towards your neighbor. You seek the good of your neighbor sometimes despite the feelings that you might have for this

neighbor. Sometimes that's the best we can do as humans when it comes to love, and that's an amazing thing. God so loved the world. God cannot do anything but love. God cannot do anything but act out of love for the world. And how does God prove that? By becoming human in the person, Jesus. By teaching us, as Jesus taught Nicodemus, that God is the spirit in the world that you cannot hold. Because it's like the wind that you cannot control that might make you uncomfortable. That might be something like a rebirthing process. That might be something painful. That might make you want to scream. But as you go through this rebirth process, this born again language that I have used in the past rather flippantly, and maybe you have heard it used in the past rather flippantly, as if being born again is just a prayer that you have to pray once in your life and then you're born again and yay it's all good. No.

Being born again, for Nicodemus, for Peter and Paul, for Mary and Martha, for all of us, is not a pretty experience. Like birth, it can be beautiful and it can also be traumatic. It is much more than a once-in-a-lifetime prayer. It's an ongoing experience where we look inside of ourselves for those places that are not born from above. That are not those things inside of ourselves that need to be reborn, remade, recreated in the image of God. This is a lifelong process. I know it is a lifelong process for me and maybe it's a lifelong process for you, as well.

When Jesus says that what is born of flesh, is flesh, and what is born of spirit, is spirit, please do not hear that flesh is evil. There has been enough damage that Christianity has done throughout our history to say that the flesh is evil, the flesh is bad. Jesus, as a good Jew, knew this story of Genesis Chapter 1 that says that in the beginning God created all things including human beings and it was very good. Your flesh is very good. My flesh is very good. Everyone's flesh is very good. What Jesus is here saying here is that often times when we are born of flesh, when we create a sense of community born out of flesh, he's referring to the ancient human way of creating community. And what is the ancient human way of forming community? It is often by condemning another person, by uniting against a common enemy, by finding someone in our community, or maybe even outside of our community, to blame. That is what is born of the flesh. You might put it like this - we've seen it in human history and in human present. That is the way of the flesh.

Jesus is here to say that is not the way of God. It is not the way of the spirit. Why? Because as our passage says, God did not send the son in order to condemn the world, but to love the world. There is no condemnation within God. Where does the condemnation come from? The flesh. It comes from humans, it comes from us. And so in our passage today, Jesus makes the very clear statement that when we get caught up into us and them mentalities, that is not of God. That is not of the spirit. That is of the flesh. And so, Jesus is here to remind us that we need to be born from above.

Some translations have it as born again. It can also be translated born from above. I prefer born from above because born again language has too much baggage. Whatever language you like to use, this rebirth is Jesus' way of inviting us to transform the habits that we have gotten into. The habits of condemning other people, conveniently scapegoating others, forming communities over and against

because in the realm of God that Jesus brings, there is no condemnation. There is a sense of taking responsibility for the harm that we have caused others.

Earlier, Melanie said that Germany is taking responsibility for the colonization that it has had in certain places of the world during the 19th and maybe 20th century by providing reparations. That's an act of being reborn, of being born from above, of saying that we messed up and we are here to repair however we can.

We have prayed for our native siblings in Canada who continue to be reminded of the colonialization that has happened in Canada with finding 215 young native children at a school who were murdered. Reparations for that. For God so loved the world that God sent God's son.

Here in the United States, how do we live into that kind of love? The theme of reparations may be the theme that we need to do here in the United States. To work with those who have been so marginalized throughout the United States history and in the United States present. To work for ways of justice, to be reborn, to be born from above as a community as a nation where we refuse to live flesh against flesh but spirit with spirit. So often in our world, the flesh of white supremacy has moved in a way that demonized black flesh or brown flesh. How can we make up for that in our history and in our present and why should we do it? Because God so loved the world that God gave something of God's self in order to redeem it. God is the gift. God is a giver. And the only thing that God can give is God's self. To show us who God truly is, God sent the son into the world to show us God's love, to reveal God's love, to show us a different way, a way that may cost us something, that may make us uncomfortable but this rebirth is what Jesus is inviting us into.

The good news about Nicodemus is that while he came to Jesus during this time and didn't understand what Jesus was saying, Nicodemus stayed with Jesus and over time, Nicodemus began to understand what Jesus was saying. And at the end when Jesus was murdered, Nicodemus was there. Nicodemus went to bury Jesus behind the tomb. Nicodemus' story is often ended at John Chapter 3 with Nicodemus just didn't understand. That's not the end of Nicodemus' story. Nicodemus' story continues. He follows Jesus all the way to Jesus' death and we assume into his resurrection. That's good news for me. I don't know about you because oftentimes when I hear Jesus speaking in the gospels and in the world today, I don't understand. I'm often confused just like Nicodemus. I would much rather prefer to hold the spirit to contain the spirit, but the spirit cannot be contained. It always moves us beyond into uncomfortable places, into spaces where rebirth is happening. And that is where we are often led into these spaces and may we enter into these spaces together knowing that we're not alone knowing that God so loved the world, God so loved you, God so loved them, God so loved the cosmos because God is love and may we continue to work for love and justice together. Amen