

6-7-09 sermon 'Anothen' Life (John 1:15-26)

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Today we celebrate our graduates. And we pray that you graduates will put your education to good use! All the intellectual and reasoning skills you have developed will not be enough, however. In order to truly see what Life is all about, you must develop spiritual insights – more than earthly knowledge. That's what Jesus is trying to help Nicodemus understand in the passage we read today ... inviting him to receive ἄνωθεν [anothen] life.

ἄνωθεν is the Greek word Jesus uses when he says, *"no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born ἄνωθεν."* The NIV and KJV translate ἄνωθεν as *"again"*: *"no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."* That's a phrase that many Christians use to distinguish themselves from other Christians – saying that they are the *"born again"* ones and therefore more authentic. The NRSV translates ἄνωθεν as *"from above"*: *"no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above."* *"Born again"* vs. *"born from above."* Do you hear the difference?

There is a difference – a crucial difference – a difference that the well-educated teacher Nicodemus does not get. He understands Jesus to mean that a person must be *"born again"* ... i.e., enter back into the womb and be given birth again. But Jesus means that a person must be *"born from above"* ... born of the Spirit, made able to see more than mere human eyes can see – only so can anyone see the kingdom of God. Seeing the kingdom of God requires spiritual eyes, not renewed physical eyes.

The truth of the matter is that the Greek word ἄνωθεν has both meanings. Jesus seems to want to get Nicodemus (and us) to think about the difference between being *"born again"* and being *"born from above."*

We have words in English that have a couple meanings, too. Like the word *"right"* – it can mean a direction (right as opposed to left) or it can mean what is correct (right as opposed to wrong). So we know about words with double meanings, and we can laugh at double entendres. We just don't have an English word that means both *"born again"* and *"born from above."* So our English translations can't show the good reason for the confusion that Nicodemus had. He wasn't being ignorant. He was responding to a straight-forward meaning of what Jesus had said about being

“*born again.*” It is a double-meaning that Jesus uses to teach Nicodemus and us as he clarifies his meaning: we must be “*born from above.*”

This morning I want us to be clear about this. All too often we say that we want to get another chance, to have the slate wiped clean, to have another go at life. That is asking to be “*born again*” – to go back and do our best a second time around. But that is *not* what Jesus says he wants for us. If we simply take another try at life’s struggles and turmoils in our own strength, we will fail all over again. We won’t make it into the Kingdom of God.

Jesus does not invite us to be “*born again*” for another try, but to be “*born from above*” – born of the Spirit, given new strength beyond our own strength, making a new and different effort at life because we are learning to allow the winds of God to stir in our lives and make us able for what we are not able to manage, not able to handle in our own power. Being born from above is not something we can do for ourselves. We did not make ourselves be born into this world to begin with, and in the same way we cannot make ourselves be born again into the spiritual dimensions of life. We *can* put ourselves in the right environment, yes – by meeting regularly with God’s people, practicing spiritual disciplines of prayer and reading of scripture and meditation. But we do *not* have the power to make ourselves live, certainly not to make ourselves live forever. We do not make ourselves be born $\alpha\nu\omega\theta\epsilon\nu$. It is something we can only invite the Lord to do ... to give us $\alpha\nu\omega\theta\epsilon\nu$ birth, to fill us with $\alpha\nu\omega\theta\epsilon\nu$ life – new life! – life *from above*, life in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our English word “*another*” expresses this perhaps. It can mean that we need “*another*” life – as in a repeat performance, another chance; or it can mean that we need an “*other*” life – different from, other than what has been thus far. It is the second meaning that Jesus invites us to take.

As you receive communion of the bread and cup today, I hope that you will ask the Lord to help you receive an *other* life, $\alpha\nu\omega\theta\epsilon\nu$ life, the life of the Spirit to make you able for all things.

Be aware that this may be a dangerous step to take. Who knows where the winds of God’s Spirit will take you ... to do God’s work of healing broken people, mending broken relationships, standing in the gap between enemy cultures. It is a serious adventure to live $\alpha\nu\omega\theta\epsilon\nu$ life. All that you have learned thus far will be brought into

new light. It is the only way to see the kingdom of God. *“I tell you the truth,”* Jesus declared, *“no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born ἄνωθεν”* – born again from above – born of the Spirit of God.

What wondrous, beautiful things you will see, when you live this ἄνωθεν life, with the Lord living in you! You will become something far more than you could ever be by yourself – you will become a part of the Body of Christ!

Anthem: “How Beautiful”