

Born of the Spirit, Eternal by Design

Beloved community, as we reflect on our scripture reading for this morning, may we settle into this sacred space and time for wondering. The reading from the gospel of John invites us to wonder how trusting that we are both born of the Spirit and eternal by design can have embodied impact in **our individual lives**, in the **communal life of each one of these congregations**, and in a **potential shared communal life as one congregation**. Let us pray:

O God, keep our spirits and every one of our senses open to living in a way of curiosity like Nicodemus. And keep our spirits and every one of our senses open to sharing with others again and again what our spirit tells us in the way of Jesus. And as we wonder together, grant us serenity to accept things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to discern the one from the other. Amen.

Let's wonder together this morning: What lessons might the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus hold for us today? When Nicodemus found Jesus in the night and confessed his awe and conviction that Jesus must have come from the power of God to be able to offer such signs and wonders, Jesus engaged with Nicodemus about what it meant that he had come from God:

Jesus said to awestruck Nicodemus, *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kin-dom of God without being born from above.”*

I think Jesus was emphasizing for Nicodemus that he wouldn't be able to participate in the realization of God's kindom (a beloved community rooted in love and justice) unless he stay connected to the love of God as his source and his womb.

Nicodemus answered (as we heard), *'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born!'*

And we heard Jesus' reply: *"Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'"*

Let's remember the substance of the kingdom of God that Jesus embodied. Jesus consistently encouraged his followers to Love God with their whole selves (heart, soul, mind and strength) and to love their neighbors as well as loving themselves. We can embody this commandment from God as revealed through Jesus. I have come to believe that one of the most powerful ways we can embody the balance of loving God, self and neighbor is by embracing the reality that God's imprint (a birthmark from the Spirit) is present in every other person with whom our paths intersect.

Today is momentous in the life of these two congregations (St. Peter's United Church of Christ and People's Congregational Church), because we have an opportunity to be truly present with each other at this intersecting moment, which will never repeat itself. Our Joint Church Task Force will invite us to wonder together, sharing insights and questions about the possibility of weaving two congregations together to become one.

Later in the gospel of John (chapter 17, verses 20-21), Jesus prays for the future communities who might find unity through his message and lived example of embodied love.

Jesus prays: *“I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all may be one, as you, Abba, are in me and I in you; I pray that they may be one in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me.”*

The world (and particularly the St. Croix Valley) has needed the way that St. Peter’s UCC has embodied Jesus’ *“born of the Spirit”* message across many years. And the world and the St. Croix Valley has needed the way that People’s Congregational Church has embodied Jesus’ *“born of the spirit”* message across many years. And... what if? What gifts of love and justice and grace could unfold if these two congregations were to unify as one (a direct answer to Jesus’ prayer) and together pursue and even stronger, more vibrant path from the present into the future?

A moment ago, I shared a conviction I have developed – that one of the most powerful ways we can embody the balance of loving God, self and neighbor is by embracing the reality that God’s imprint (a birthmark from the Spirit) is present in every other person with whom our each of our paths intersects. A few minutes ago, I spoke with our young people about dignity (being worthy of honor and respect). We will love one another well today by opening our senses (seeing closely, listening carefully, holding an open body posture) as we share responses to these three questions from our Joint Church Task Force (seen by many of you over email and to be repeated again, but shared in this moment of meditation). As it pertains to a new congregation:

What are the possibilities that excite you about a potential consolidation?

What concerns, scares or saddens you about a potential consolidation?

What do you need to know to support a consolidation?

Because we believe that we are each born of the Spirit, we will approach this conversation with love in the form of kindness. Our conviction that we each bear a birthmark of the Spirit can embody itself most effectively today through kindness – love that acts from a place of seeing the other and wanting and working to know the other.

One of my favorite heroes is Mr. Fred Rogers. He consistently taught (and continues to teach beyond his death) how to live as people born of the Spirit. In the late 1980s, I would come home mid-day from Kindergarten, plant myself in front of the 4-channel TV, and drink in the Holy Spirit as embodied by Mr. Fred Rogers. Now my children access his same spirit and embodied voice and love through their iPad. If you have never seen the video of Fred Rogers making an argument in front of a congressional committee to fund the show Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, I encourage you to search for it on the internet. It is very moving. Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister who was bullied as a child in school and chose to transform that pain he had experienced through his belief that love and kindness were possible and powerful. Hear these words of encouragement for us today from Mr. Rogers about being born of the Spirit:

“I believe that appreciation is a holy thing—that when we look for what's best in a person we happen to be with at the moment, we're doing what God does all the time. So in loving and appreciating our neighbor, we're participating in something sacred.”

I'll read that again. *“I believe that appreciation is a holy thing--that when we look for what's best in a person we happen to be with at the moment, we're doing what God does all the time. So in loving and appreciating our neighbor, we're participating in something sacred.”*

And this, friends, is salvation. Salvation happens over and over again. Are you saved? It depends on whether you are engaged in love and justice and kindness, day by day, with others.

I'll close with the final verses of our reading as they come to us through the ecumenical translation called "*The Inclusive Bible*":

"God so loved the world as to give the Only Begotten One, that whoever believes may not die, but have eternal life. God sent the Only Begotten into the world not to condemn the world, but that through the Only Begotten, the world might be saved."

Let's be agents of eternal life. Let's be agents of the world being saved – restored to God – through our acts of kindness.

As we come forward together to participate in Holy Communion, side by side, may we open our senses to each other's dignity – to our common birthmark from the Holy Spirit. Let us love one another because Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN) with & at St. Peter's UCC (Stillwater, MN)
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John 3: 1-17