

Born Again Presbyterians

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 6th Sunday of Easter, May 8, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

This is Mother's Day. Of course, it's pretty late to remind you of it. If you didn't know it before, there's nothing much you can do about it now. Some florists may be opened today to accomodate late consciences. Most, though, are probably closed today, so that leaves out flowers. You might possibly still take your mother or your children's mother out to lunch and pretend like it was a big surprise. I asked Kay last week what she wanted for Mothers' Day and she said, "Two days away from you and the boys." So that's what I gave her. She's up in Lewistown for a mother-daughter banquet and will be home tonight.

Will Rogers once said that a mother is the only thing so constituted that they possess eternal love under any and all circumstances and no matter how you treat them you still have their love. Well, I think we can say the same for God. The Bible usually refers to God as our heavenly Father but it also sometimes uses the metaphor of a mother to describe God's relationship to us. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord said, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." And the Lord also said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" The Lord also said through the prophet Hosea "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you."

So it's perfectly biblical to speak of God, metaphorically, either as a father or as a mother. Now, I think we all realize that God is neither a man or a woman. The Lord says, "I am God and not man; the holy one in your midst." All mothers and fathers are imperfect. We mess up. Sometimes we do cruel, terrible things to our children. Some of you had unhappy childhoods. You may have been abused by a mother or father. The idea of God being like your father and mother may sound repulsive to you. But we don't learn who God is by looking at our parents, good or bad, or by analysing what it means to be a mother or a father. Rather we learn what it means to be a good father or mother by meditating upon how God has revealed himself ~~to be~~ in Holy Scripture.

Now we can't talk about mothers or fathers without speaking also of birth. If we've been born then we have a mother and father. No one is born without having a father and mother. St. John tells us that just as we are born into our biological family, we're born again into the family of God. I know there's a lot of confusion about what it means to be born again. Some Presbyterians don't feel they can call themselves "born again". We often think of a born again Christian as someone who has had a quite visible change of direction in their lives as a result of their relationship to Jesus Christ.

Many Presbyterians don't consider themselves born again Christians because they've never had a dramatic conversion from unbelief to belief in Christ; from a life of ^{blatant obvious, visible} sin to a life of consecrated service to Christ. Many Presbyterians grew up in a Christian home. You went to Sunday School and Church from the time you were

little children. You came to trust in Christ at an early age. You can no more remember when you were born again than you can remember when you were born the first time. What is important is not whether you can remember when you were born again. What's important is that you trust in Christ now as your Lord and Savior, you love God's children, and you seek to follow Christ. The Bible doesn't make any distinctions between born again Christians and ordinary Christians. If we're Christians we're born again Christians. Born again Christians are the only kind of Christians there are.

~~But~~ ~~Not~~ But how are we born again?

~~We're born again into God's family by the loving will of God, not by our own will.~~ We don't choose to be born. None of us chose our parents. In fact, if we had been given the choice, some of us would have decided not to be born. Life can sometimes get us down. We don't choose to be born. I'm not sure that I would have chosen my mom and dad if I'd been given the opportunity to choose my parents. I probably would have chosen two people who were a lot more rich than my parents were. I probably would have chosen a couple who were a lot more educated. I might have chosen a couple who were a lot younger. But I didn't choose my parents. They chose me even though they really didn't know for sure what they were going to get. But they chose me and I'm glad.

Just as we don't choose our biological parents, we don't choose to be born again. Jesus said, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name." If the new birth was a matter of our free choice, I'm afraid

nobody would be born again. Nobody would choose God as our father. Left to ourselves we invent our own gods. Left to ourselves we would all choose the path that leads to hell.

But the good news is that God chooses us^{For his own sons + daughters; we} who would never choose him. The good news is that God has a free will. The good news is that God freely chooses us to be his very own children. This is truly good news. Karl Barth claims that this is at the very heart of the Gospel. God chooses us to be God's own sons and daughters. God chooses sinful, weak, men and women to be members of his family. God chooses to discipline us and train us and teach us and mold us to become more and more like Christ. God is not ashamed to call us his sons and daughters. God didn't have to give us a new birth. God didn't give us a new birth because of anything he saw in us or foresaw in us. God chose us for his own children. God chose rebellious, prodigal men and women to be his own beloved children.

And St John tells us that everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God. Everyone! If you trust in Christ as your Lord and Savior you have been born again. You are God's own child. You don't have to have a dramatic conversion. You don't have to have a mountain top religious experience. I'm grateful for the wonderful testimonies of men and women like Charles Colson who have had dramatic conversion experiences. But I'm just as grateful for the men and women who can never remember a time that they did not trust Christ as their Savior and seek to follow him.

I remember so well when my own children were born. The thing that I

remember most is that they didn't want to be born. All three were born by Caesarean Section. Kay was in labor for over 22 hours with our first child. He didn't want to come out. He was in there thinking, "Hey, it's nice and warm and *don't have to make bed, clean bathrooms, dust, vacuum* cosy here. Leave me alone." We chose them, they didn't choose us.

And long before our children recognized us or obeyed us or trusted us or came to love us, we were there feeding them, washing them, cuddling them, talking to them, playing with them, singing to them, long before they could understand what we were saying - long before they could respond in love and trust to us. But as the days and months and years went by they began to respond to us, they began to trust us, they began to follow us, they began to love us.

Now, if you ask your children, "Can you remember when you were born?" Most likely they'll respond, "You must be crazy. How in the world could I ever remember when I was born?" So you tell them what it was like when they were born. *No circumstances, no place,* Or try asking your children, "When did you first come to trust me?" Most likely your son or daughter will just stare at you. "How can I possibly remember when I first trusted you?" But they might remember times in their lives when they trust they had for you became particularly real and meaningful for them.

That's the way our relationship to God is when we're born again. God loves us and cares for us and washes us with the water of rebirth and feeds us with his Word and gives us his Holy Spirit long before we can respond or trust or love God. We can't remember when we were born again any more than we can remember when we were born the first time. We can, however, sometimes remember times when

we yielded ourselves to God's will, when we took a new step of faith, when we said NO to some powerful temptation. Those are signs that we have been born again. And because of God's gracious love and choice, we come to believe and trust and obey and follow to our lives end.

One more thing. God has other children yet to be reborn. God calls us to be fruitful mid-wives - to assist and help in the birthing process - so that all men and women might come to be born again and grow up in the faith, following Christ, obeying him and loving our brothers and sisters for his sake.

Let us pray: Risen Christ, may we who in baptism die to sin, rise again to new life and find our place in your living body. May the new covenant sealed in your blood bring healing and reconciliation to this wounded world. Halleluiah. You are risen. We are risen with you. Praise and glory to the living God. Amen.