

Let's See Your Birth Certificate!

[Text - John 3:1-17]

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Where exactly were you born? Can you prove it? Do you have your birth certificate on you?

Have you been born *again*? Can you prove that? Do you have your *baptismal* certificate on you?

What does your DNA have to say about your ancestry and pedigree?

What proof can you provide of your religious pedigree and pureness?

Inquiring minds want to know!

There seems to be a great deal of anxiety and alarm these days about people's genealogical lines, geographical origins, gender identification, and genuineness of faith. And while a sincere *inquisitiveness* about others may be understandable, a blatant *inquisition* is completely unacceptable. Throughout his ministry, Jesus consistently breaks-down the walls and bridges the gap between rich and poor, male and female, Samaritan and Jew, the self-proclaimed "righteous" and the socially-branded "sinner". In this morning's reading from *John* there's a fantastic interchange between Jesus the Messiah and Nicodemus the Pharisee. And in this exchange, Jesus puts-forth a fundamental principle concerning a person's standing in the eyes of the Holy One: "Truly, I tell you, no one can see the Realm of God without being born from above."

According to Jesus, seeing, understanding and participating in the Divine Realm is completely unrelated to a person's wealth or gender, nationality or race, social standing or religious pedigree. He maintains that our essential and eternal identity is not determined or defined by earthly standards, but rather from a

higher, spiritual perspective. So while our place of birth or ethnicity, background or beliefs may be interesting, what is essential is that we all be born anew - "from above". Our true identities are shaped by something beyond our ancestral roots, the places in which we were raised, or the perspectives and prejudices to which we often cling.

Jesus teaches and shows us that the physical qualities and social parameters that we tend to tout as being central to who we are, are blown-away by the breath and wind of the Holy Spirit. He says, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." This past Wednesday, many of us were reminded of the awesome sound and power, energy and freedom of the wind. Many sturdy and solid trees were tumbled or trimmed by that invisible yet potent force. In a similar way, the freely moving, unseen power of the Divine Spirit can uproot and re-configure those solid structures and social frameworks upon which we often base our lives.

In our Continuing Testament, John Killinger writes, "I have discovered that my ideas of reality are what I have been programmed to think of as reality, but that there are hundreds, thousands of ways of thinking...that are ...beyond my...limited way of seeing the world. And if I am tolerant today of viewpoints different from my own - those of Muslims and Hindus, gays and lesbians, minorities and immigrants, vegetarians and vegans - it's because I realize how completely I am at the mercy of my restricted vision of Life....Jesus said to Nicodemus, 'You can't see the things I am trying to teach you from where you've been standing. You must be born again, this time from above.'"

But where, exactly, is "above"? On a spherical planet "above" could be *any* direction, depending on where you're standing. Yet on a spiritual plane, "above" signifies something higher and more

noble, gracious and uplifting - something or someone that elevates our thoughts, raises our sights, and helps us “up our game” as it were. For me, I find it helpful to contemplate and emulate the life and example of Jesus Christ. His compassion and openness, forgiveness and graciousness seem to me to be in harmony with the highest good - the ultimate “God”. Yet beyond the inspiration of Jesus, I also find enlightenment and encouragement through many of people sitting right here in this room. Individually and collectively, you welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, lift-up the disheartened, and embody the Good News of Jesus Christ. And as the Body of Christ, you and I together are continually being inspired to a higher level of acting and being.

Being “born from above” is an active and interactive, living and ongoing process. Not unlike the wind, it can ebb and flow, move and shift - often in ways that catch us by surprise. One of the weaknesses of many “born again” theologies, is that they present the experience as a “once-and-done” deal. People will often point to the specific day, time, and place where they were “born again” - just like a Daughter of the American Revolution or a Descendant of the Mayflower might proudly point to that particular place in their lineage. And while our faith journeys may have certain peak moments or events, it’s important that we don’t get stuck memorializing them, or allow them to keep us from growing and moving forward.

I personally have been born again - and again and again and again and again.... Apparently, the Holy One is still working on me! And I sincerely pray that for as long as I live, I will keep-on being re-born, renewed, and revitalized by the Holy One’s life-changing power and Spirit. For this to happen, I realize that I must remain open and flexible; connected with and committed to a community of compassionate, and caring people. I may have certificates that can prove that I was born, and that I was

baptized! The evidence of my being “born again - from *above*” however, can only be displayed as I live-out my Faith, day by day - by faithfully following that “higher way” to which Jesus Christ calls us all.