

Do You Get It?

By Keith E Gatling

Sermon for June 18, 2000

Lessons for Holy Trinity in Year A

Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 29

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

I still remember the incident. I was walking from my day job at Bird Library to my evening job at Domino's Pizza. It was the off-season at SU, and so the streets were pretty deserted as I made my way down Walnut Place toward Erie Blvd.

Then suddenly, from behind me, I heard footsteps. The downstater in me told me not to turn around and look, but to just ignore it - and walk a little faster to see if whoever it was matched my pace. They matched it.

I quickened my pace a little more and the person behind me quickened theirs to match again.

I was just about to finally break into a run when the person behind me beat me to it, jumped in front of me, and said the words that I'll probably never forget.

"Excuse me, but have you been born again?"

As I stood there with my body shaking from the adrenaline rush that comes with the old fight or flight response, I wanted to do nothing more than to wrap my fingers around his throat and pound that idiot into the ground, making him wish he had never been born the *first* time, much less born *again*.

"Don't you *ever* do that to *anyone* again!" I shouted at him, and then continued on my

way to Erie Blvd, trying to stuff my heart back down my throat and into my chest where it belonged.

"Have you been born again?" I've always hated that question, but that incident just gave me one more reason to dislike it.

Why do I hate it so much? Because in my experience it's been used as a way to split Christians apart rather than to bring them together. It's been used sort of as a litmus test of whether or not you're a "real" Christian. If you don't have a time and date stamp for when you were "born again" then you can't possibly be a real Christian, but are merely one of those people who goes to church every Sunday morning, and is faking it.

And yet Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You must be born again."

I've heard and read many Christians saying that no one is born Christian, you can't just say that you've always been Christian. They say that you have to have a born again experience in order to be counted as a real Christian. You have to be able to point to a time when you made the decision.

I say to that, no one is born speaking English. But - if you're born into a family

that speaks it every day, it's very likely that you're going to grow up speaking it too. There is no conscious decision on your part to learn English, it becomes as natural as breathing to you. You may at some point decide to learn *more* about the language you speak. You might even decide at some point to learn a different language and make that your primary one, abandoning English. But the fact that you didn't consciously decide to learn English doesn't mean that you weren't a "real" English speaker.

Why then, do so many people say this about Christianity. Why is it so hard for so many people to accept the possibility of people gradually growing in a faith that has been theirs for as long as they can remember? Why does there have to be a time stamp on it for it to count?

Because Jesus said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again."

I also hate that question because it can all too easily change the faith we have in God because of what God has *done for us* and *promised to us* into a *work* we perform in order to *earn* it. If you've not been born again, if you haven't had that experience, then you're holding back something, you're not working hard enough, and all of us quiet, unemotional Lutherans are going straight to Hell.

Why? Because Jesus says you must be born again.

Now, there are any number of theologically correct responses I could give you for times when someone asks you that question, but I'm not going to bother. Why not? Two reasons. First of all, because theologically

correct *Lutheran* answers probably won't convince the non-Lutheran who's asking the question. Heck, if you've read the letters page of **The Lutheran**, then you probably know that there are even *Lutherans* who aren't always convinced by theologically correct Lutheran answers.

Second, because we really don't want to get into that game. We don't want to get into a theological debate that's made up merely of snappy retorts, and is more concerned with winning and getting the last word. We don't want to have a discussion on the level of two eight-year-olds on the playground arguing over whose theology is better.

Instead, I'm going to ask you a question. It's going to be a different question from the one that I've hated for these many years. But it's a question that is just as important, is perhaps better understood, and that I suspect means the same thing.

My question is, "When did you get it?"

When did you get the fact that Christianity is *not* about being good enough to *earn* God's love, but is instead about the fact that he loves us in spite of how good we're *not*, in spite of how bad we are. That he sent his son to die for each and every one of us not because we were good enough to deserve it, but because we were so desperately in need of that kind of help?

When did you get that? When did the little light go on over your head, telling you that it wasn't about what we do for God, but about what he's done for us? When did the little light go on telling you that all we do is only a gracious and thankful *response* for all he has already done for *us*?

When did you get it? Or are you just getting it *now*? If you have children, do *they* get it? Are you teaching them in the name of "good order," (a very Lutheran concept) that Jesus loves all *good* little children, or do they understand that Jesus loves the bad little children too, and even seeks them out?

Do you get it? If you didn't get it before, do you get it now?

Isaiah got it.

Isaiah said, "I am a man of unclean lips...and my eyes have seen the Lord!"

He said that. But he didn't stop there. He went on to accept the coal that the angel brought to him. The coal that God used to take away his guilt and his sin.

And that's the important point. Isaiah really didn't do anything other than let God touch him with the coal. Isaiah was not the moving force in his sins being removed, *God* was. The action was all God's.

What Isaiah had was the *reaction*. Isaiah didn't *earn* the forgiveness of his sins by doing anything special for God. But he reacted to the *gift* of forgiveness, and that's what's important.

Do you get it? Did you get it a long time ago, or are you just getting it now? Do you remember *when* you got it? Does it even matter that you know when you got it, as long as you got it?

And yet, if you can remember when you got it, if you can at least remember a time before you got it and the way you saw things after you got it, has getting it made a difference in your life? Has it moved you from trying always to *earn* God's favor to rejoicing in the fact that you already have it? Has it made you less fearful of God's wrath because of the uncountable ways you've messed up, and changed you so that you're looking forward to meeting the one who loves you so much that he died for you? I've said many times that if God loves me more than Cheryl does, then I definitely have to meet him.

If getting it has changed you, it has made you into a new person. And if you have been made into a new person - then you *have* been born again.

Even if you can't give me a date and time stamp on it.

This is most certainly true.