

Faith Mennonite Church  
February 17, 2008 ~ 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent

### **Into New Birth**

Long time friendships have a life of their own, a soul mate quality to them, like an old sweater, tattered and worn, but oh so warm and cozy as all get out. These are the friendships that rise above time and miles brought on by changing circumstances. Days, months, and even years can separate, but come that moment when once again two friends reunite over a cup of coffee, all is well, as it always is... an unexplainable constancy...soul mates slipping into each others shoes.

Constancy is an intriguing word. Constancy is the quality or fact of remaining the same despite change or variation in other things.

The constancy of a “no withholding anything” friendship is a treasured gift. The constancy of a “you are always there for me” friendship is the assurance of never being left alone.

So what does constancy have to do with new birth?

Mine is a story of a dear friend whose world keeps getting smaller and smaller and the personal challenge I’ve had to face in order to remain constant in our friendship.

PAUSE

I’d like you to meet Jim, a friend of mine for 25 years.

\*An accountant turned pastor, now retired.

\*An athletic man hit by Hodgkin’s disease at age 25, survived, but lost control of most of the lower half of his body due to the severity of the treatment.

\*A man with a deep faith in God

\*A man determined to live life fully despite the limitations that come with a wheel chair

-tough to beat on the tennis courts, performing amazing wheelies and spin-arounds.

-a speedster on his hand pedaled bike

-avid golfer

-handles a converted van without the use of foot pedals with remarkable agility and ease.

\*A man dedicated to offering spiritual direction to anyone in need. He volunteers at a prison.

\*A man devoted to God and deeply grateful to be so privileged to have the mobility he has.

His drive to continually exercise his body put us in a routine filled with activity. I can’t begin to count how many times we’ve biked around Lake Harriet on hot summer days or wheeled our way through malls during winter over the past twenty five years.

\*On many of these trips I’d pack a lunch or we’d stop somewhere and have lunch.

Conversation was easy. There was so much going on in each of our lives to talk about.

The friendship was easy.

PAUSE

\*One year ago, our friendship was confronted with a change in our circumstance.

\*My friend Jim developed a deep wound on his lower backside that continually re-infected itself despite medical efforts to keep it sterile. The hospital became his second home.

\*His bike and tennis racket now hang on the garage wall. I’ve spent many hours at his bedside in the hospital.

\*Just before Christmas he had surgery. A flap was glued over the wound and if all went well he might be able to return to his good ole days. We were optimistic and looking forward to bike rides around Lake Harriet come spring.

PAUSE

\*The flap didn't hold. I received a call at 10pm with Jim sobbing over the phone, crying out that God had deserted him and that he didn't want to live any longer.

\*I rushed to the hospital and sat there holding his hand while he sobbed off and on, a broken man.

\*In that moment I knew our friendship had changed. This lonely man will now need me more than ever before. He finally fell asleep, I kissed him on the forehead and whispered in his ear, telling him that I loved him.

\*I walked away from a man now looking very old, now with a permanent bag attached to him, and an unpleasant odor about him, asking what is to become of us? I felt the fear that our friendship might now become my labor of love.

\*Jim is now out of the hospital waiting for whatever will happen next. On Tuesday's and Thursday's I step into his house, say "Neil on Wheels" with my kettle of homemade soup, a sandwich, a bottle of his favorite sparkling peach drink and two apple turnover's from Kolwalski's. We talk baseball. We share journal writing.

PAUSE

\*Our friendship did not become my labor of love as I feared it would be. I eagerly anticipate Tuesday's and Thursday's. I look forward to our Friday night card games.

\*And this brings me back to the word constancy, the quality or fact of remaining the same despite change or variation in other things.

\*The constancy of love.

\*How Jim and I spend time together has changed. We mostly sit and talk and sometimes run out of talk and just sit and look out his window watching birds at the feeder. He's a lonely man. Most of his friends rarely stop by anymore because of how awkward it feels.

\*But we've remained constant in our friendship. We are soul mates, old shoes with unknown miles yet to travel.

\*This word constancy continually plays itself out in my life. Change and variation swirls around me, but the constancy I have in my love for Jim, in my love for Debbie, in my love for my family, and yes in my new found love for this church, lifts me up and sustains me.

\*And even more important is the knowing that I live in the constancy of God's love no matter my changing circumstances. It didn't hurt growing up singing, "Jesus Loves Me This I Know"

\*I come to this place in my life knowing that the constancy of God's love for me despite my erratic ways makes it possible to be constant for others.

\*My friendship with Jim will take us into uncharted waters, but it's our constancy for each other that will see us through.

Neil Okerlund

Birth and Rebirth  
February 17, 2008  
Joan Kreider

As an obstetrician, I have attended thousands of births. As a mother, I have actively participated in three. So, you could say I have a lot of experience with the process of birthing. As a Christian, I get upset sometimes when conservatives appropriate terms for their own use, defining them in a narrow way that doesn't fit my understanding of Jesus. One of those terms is "traditional family values". And another is being "born again". I find myself sort of cringing when I read the passage from John that you just heard—I am not very comfortable calling myself a "born again Christian". But just as we can reclaim "family values" by redefining them in terms of love, respect, growth, and tolerance, I would like to explore how we could reclaim this idea of re-birth.

There are so many perspectives to consider in this story: I find myself wandering back and forth between the experience of the mother, the experience of the child, the real, the metaphorical, life before birth, labor, life after birth. Bear with me as I jump from one to another, hopefully eventually arriving at some helpful ideas.

As I read over this passage, I am struck with how surprised Nicodemus is by what Jesus told him: "But how could I enter my mother as a grown man and be born again?" He is quite the literalist. I can imagine that Nicodemus, as a first century man, had had some experience with childbirth. He likely knew the stories of an aunt or sister who died in giving birth. I imagine that as he heard Jesus' words he might have been jarred into the midst of memories of the scene of the arrival of his first born:

He stood outside his mud home, as a midwife and women of the village attended to his wife. He stood alone, listening to the noises that came from within. The cries, the whimpering, the quiet encouragement of women's voices. Soft conversations punctuated by laughter. The cries of his wife getting louder, closer together, turning into wails, pitched higher and higher. Noises he had never heard his wife make before. Long hours passed, and he briefly wandered off to the town square. And then a frightening scream called him back—his wife, frantic, saying "I can't do it, I will die! No!" And again the soft encouraging words of the midwife: "Push now. Hard. Keep going, you are strong. You can do it." And then again his wife, "No, I'm dying! I can't!" followed by the reassurance, "You are doing it; good job. Keep it up." He heard the screams turn into grunts and groans, animal sounds. The encouraging became quieter once again as a new rhythm set in: gasps of breath, the sound of pure determined effort. He paced, not so scared now, wanting to stay close by. Another hour passed and he heard so little; a new fear built up in him: "it's taking too long. It won't work. He too would lose his wife and his first born." The fear turned to terror as he heard his wife scream again; but this time it was drowned out by the enthusiastic cheering of the gathered women. And then silence, followed by a quiet snuffle, and a high pitched wail of another voice as his newborn son filled his lungs with good fresh air.

Thinking about birth as a spiritual notion was foreign to Nicodemus: this remembered experience was all about the animal-like baseness of the world of women. He remembered with a little disgust the smells that greeted him when he reentered the house: an odd pungent

combination of sweat, feces, blood, something else. But he also remembered gazing for the first time into the face of his newborn son: and feeling such intense love for that little vulnerable pure face, the slightly vacant deeply dark eyes.

So back to the present. Our birthing is not quite like it was in the first century. Most of us no longer deliver at home. There are pain medications, antibiotics for infections, fetal monitors making electronic noises, sterile fields and c sections for when things go awry. Women rarely face a real possibility of death. And yet, the process of birthing is the one time in a woman's life when she has to face a task that at times seems completely impossible. And like Nicodemus' wife, at a certain point in labor almost all women feel like they just might die.

What might it look like to imagine with Nicodemus a God who is the woman giving birth? There are other places in the bible that refer to God as birthing us: Isaiah says "Yahweh cries out as a woman in labor, gasping and panting." (Is 42:14) and "can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even if she should forget, I will never forget you" (Is 49:15). It certainly is a little odd to think of God as this mother, holding us in her uterus (or "womb") waiting for us to be ready to be born. We are sitting in God's body, complacent, comfortable, all our needs are provided; a warm home, food, oxygen, even waste disposal.

But when the time of gestation is up, God is ready to push us out. There are a few things that I think are quite noteworthy about the birth process. The baby usually signals the beginning of labor. It is the mother, not the baby, who subsequently does the hard work—sweating and laboring, pushing us out. An unborn baby's head is malleable, to be able to be re-formed to fit his or her mother's birth canal. And the mother's pelvic bones adjust and stretch to accommodate the passage of the baby. The shape of the baby's head and shoulders are shaped perfectly to fit the bones of the mother's pelvis—a baby's head is widest front to back and the shoulders widest side to side. Similarly, the bones of the top of the pelvis are wider side to side and then in the middle and outlet, are wider front to back. So a baby being born rotates its head and shoulders as it spirals its way down the birth canal towards the outside world. In a variety of ways, the process requires an intimate working relationship between the mother and her baby.

What a great analogy: as we go through God's great labor of re-birthing us, God pushes us and we are reshaped, reformed even, as we spiral toward the light. We spiral out to a life in which all is new and exciting and waiting for us to learn and absorb like crazy. God takes a big risk; we take a big risk. We are passengers in an intimate journey with God. And yet, once born, we are separate human beings in the world. To be born again is to leave the shelter and safety of that uterine environment where placenta sustains us, and fluid buffers us. Into this world, chaotic and bright, vulnerable to cold and hunger and loneliness.

Yet we are not born to be abandoned on the beach like baby turtles. Like Nicodemus' baby, we are born into a community which is cheering our arrival. In Romans 8 there is a passage, roughly translated, about how all creation is straining on tiptoe to see the children of God come into their own. What a great idea! The entire world welcomes a transformed us, energized and nudged into maturity. But to think about God as the most excited of all, the proud parent who has just given birth: gazing with absolute adoration into the face of her newborn, filled to the brim with excitement and hope about who we are going to grow up to be. Filled with boundless

expectations, ready to nourish, guide, teach and protect us along our way. The church is given to us as the wider community in which this process happens. We could even think of our church as the midwife of this process: the quiet encouragers and the cheering squad.

What is our rebirthing process right now? Individually: am I ready to signal the end of my complacent gestation? Do I get to say when that labor starts or will circumstances decide it for me? Am I willing to be smushed and shaped and reformed by God? In what way do I need to become a newborn, vulnerable and utterly dependent on God to teach and guide me? What new world, not necessarily of my choosing, am I being birthed into? Am I willing to set forth into the unknown?

And for our congregation: in some ways, the last ten years has been like a gestation period, as Faith Mennonite's healing was guided by Patrick and Patty in a safe womb-like but inward-looking world. One of the things we heard from the congregation in our survey last fall is that many of you feel that now is the time for a new direction: a reaching outward into the world and community. Into what will we be birthed? How do we need to be reshaped? What do we need to let go of? Are we willing to trust our mother God to hold us? What do we need to learn from scratch? I believe that God is ready to help us whenever we are ready to be born again!