

**Rappahannock Christian Church – 3/20/11**  
**Dr. Kenneth Wilbur**

**Communion Meditation**

During the season of Lent we are moving toward the crucifixion of Christ. As we ponder Christ's death, perhaps we can also think about His life and how He relentlessly moved from place to place proclaiming God's mercy and calling people to repentance; but we also remember that this road eventually led to Calvary.

As we gather at this Table we can remember all of this. This is also an opportunity for us to rededicate ourselves to live for Christ and to be a witness for Him. This Table reminds us of Christ's sacrifice and it reminds us that we are His servants, whom He has called to do His work.

Let me read to you from Matthew's gospel the words that Jesus said to His disciples in the upper room on the occasion of that first Lord's Supper.

Matthew 26:26-29 - While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

**Rebirth**

This morning our Scripture is taken from the third chapter of John. Our reading contains what is perhaps the most well known verse in all of the Bible - John 3:16. Here we have the story of the encounter between Jesus and a member of the Jewish ruling council named Nicodemus.

John 3:1-17 – Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Have you heard the commercial that’s on TV right now for a product called “Re-bath”? Well, this ad kind of worries me because they show all this mildew and rot and they say, “Don’t worry about it. We can cover it up with a shower and tub liner.” It doesn't sound to me like that would be a very good solution.

Our passage today isn’t about Re-bath; it’s about *Re-birth*. Jesus speaks, not about covering imperfections up, not even about "reformation" -- that is, correcting a few things which are wrong. Instead, he speaks about rebirth -- a transformation of the entire person. This is a work that only God can accomplish.

Jesus is talking to Nicodemus in this passage, but you know, I always think of this story and the one of the "Woman at the Well" (recorded in the next chapter) as companion stories. I don’t think it’s by accident that they appear so close together. Do you remember what Jesus said to the Woman at the Well? He said, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water.” It’s SO close to what He says to Nicodemus! And what is the Woman’s reaction? She is confused. “What do you mean? The well is deep. You have no bucket with which to draw. How will you give me this Living Water?” Her reaction is SO similar to that of Nicodemus!

There are also contrasts between the stories. Nicodemus is a righteous, religious Jew. The Woman at the Well is a lowly person. She’s a Samaritan – a half-breed, and she’s *far* from righteous! Perhaps they represent the full spectrum of humanity. But the message Jesus brings to each is the same. No matter who you are God will give you life if you come to him in faith!

So in this story why does Nicodemus not understand? Let's go back to that for a minute. Why doesn't he “get it”? I believe it's because he is thinking and living under the Old Covenant, under the Law of Moses. If you go back to Deuteronomy you will see it all laid out in stark terms:

If you will obey the covenant you will be blessed. You will have lands and fruits and vineyards. I will give you health and offspring. You will have victory over your enemies. You will live long in the land I am giving you. But if you break the

covenant, if you do not obey its commands, you will be cut off. You will lose your lands. Your enemies will conquer you. They will make you their slaves. Your very life will be cursed.

The landscape of the Old Covenant is earthly. It's very "here and now." There is little thought of individuals being saved and going to heaven. Yes, they hoped that one day God would establish His kingdom through the Messiah, but even this was a hope that they saw being fulfilled here on earth, freeing them from their oppressors here and now. So their thinking went something like this: we keep the Sabbath Day, being careful to do no work. We make sure that we ceremonially wash properly before each meal. We eat the right foods, prepared in the Kosher way. We avoid all contact with those "dirty Gentile sinners." If we all live life exactly right like this, perhaps we will compel God to send us the Messiah.

Nicodemus thinks this way, and knows about righteous living.

But to be "born again" by the Spirit of God? What is that? He doesn't have a clue. This idea is radically new! In the same way that our parents brought us into the world -- flesh gives birth to flesh -- so also we must be "born" spiritually.

To me, John 3:16 is the key to the whole thing. God sent His Son and whoever believes in Him will now be accepted. A right relationship with God is no longer dependant on how many prayers you've uttered. It isn't about having abstained from picking up too many sticks on the Sabbath Day. It is not dependant on us, but on God Himself. God has shown us mercy by sending Christ Jesus as the sacrificial lamb which takes away sin if you will believe. Yes, even someone as "righteous" in appearance as Nicodemus must be born again, must come to God and ask for forgiveness -- the same way the Samaritan woman -- someone who, by every standard, then and now, would be considered hopelessly lost, outside the camp, unclean—must also come. And if *you* come to God in faith, GOD WILL RECIEVE YOU AND WILL FORGIVE YOU!!! There is no one so good that they do not need to humble themselves and receive forgiveness, nor is there anyone so sinful that God is unable or unwilling to cleanse and save them!

Where are you? Maybe you are a good person -- squeaky clean, or maybe you are more like the Woman at the Well who has lived her life in sin? It really doesn't matter who you are or what your past may be like. Christ pleads with you, "Come to me – I will receive you. Every single one who comes I will receive and forgive. Come to me and be born again."

### **Benediction**

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. – Ephesians 3:20-21