

PEOPLE CAN CHANGE

Second in series: "People Can Change!"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
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John 3:1-17

I believe people can change! This series of sermons is based on the belief that people can change.

But, the Bible is quite pessimistic about the ability of people to change themselves. We are convinced that no one can change others, but the Bible is also sure that few of us can change ourselves. Robert K. Hudnut has written a book called, Boot Strap Fallacy: What the Self-Help Books Don't Tell You. What the self-help books don't tell us (and these books are very popular, indicating that people do want to change) is that the boot-strap method--pulling yourself up by your own boot strap--doesn't work. Hudnut writes, "We must have an experience of what we cannot do in order to break through to what we can do...You can't be a self-actualizing person who is free from erroneous zones and thinks positively, on your own. You can't do it alone under a tree." He makes the plea that change occurs when God takes over and does the achieving, does the changing, through us.

The ability to change oneself, which most self-help books preach, is impossible for most of us because of the reality of sin, which moderns tend to ignore. Sin, as defined in last week's study of Adam and Eve, is self-centeredness, cover-up, blaming others, refusing to take responsibility for one's actions. When faced with the reality of sin, you can see why it is so difficult to change, and why it is well nigh impossible to change yourself.

Our gospel lesson today proclaims that God does the changing, and the work of God, the change effected by God, is so profound that it is like being born all over again. The term "born again" is mentioned rarely in the New Testament, yet our conservative, fundamentalist Christian friends use it widely. Many of them use "born again" to refer to an experience they define and for which they establish the rules. "Born again" means what they define it to be, and the procedure, the process, by which a person is born again is set up by them! We tend to react against that type of narrowness, but let us not throw out the baby with the bathwater! Let's not leave conversion to the fundamentalists!

Jesus told Nicodemus that to enter the kingdom of God, one must be born again. Even though the term is not used often in the Bible, the concept is basic. Rebirth, redemption, is the heart of the gospel. And Jesus said the experience is absolutely essential in order to enter the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God, or eternal life as John often uses, begins in this life and is fulfilled in the next.

I suspect that many church members do not understand what Jesus is talking about, and have not had the experience. Many feel that they are living a good life. They feel they have no need of a conversion experience. But, said Jesus, "Unless you are born again, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." That is quite a strong statement. You may not see a blinding light, but a deep spiritual experience and experiences are necessary. It is one thing to belong to a church, to discuss in groups, to work on committees, to enjoy church dinners and fellowship groups, but there is something missing. It is something else to experience the power of Christ in your life.

It is significant for us that Nicodemus is the one to whom Jesus made such a strong statement. For Nicodemus is like most of us who were reared in good homes, who haven't murdered or stolen, and who are content with our own brand of righteousness. For if anyone was doing fine in God's eyes, it must have been Nicodemus. Surely, Nicodemus was living a fine, religious life. Surely, Nicodemus did not need to be born again. Yet it was to Nicodemus that Jesus said these words. Nicodemus was wealthy: a fine, upstanding, prosperous man of the community. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were the best people in the land. There were never more than 6,000 of them. A man became a Pharisee by taking a pledge in front of three witnesses that he would spend all his life observing every detail of the Jewish law. Pharisees were serious about their religion, about living righteous, clean, good lives. They were zealous in their desire to be God's people. Not only was Nicodemus a righteous Pharisee, he was ruler of the Jews. This meant that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, a court of 70 members, the Supreme Court of the Jews. Rome limited their authority, but still they were powerful. They had religious jurisdiction over every Jew in the world. Nicodemus was a righteous, moral, religious leader of the people. Surely, Jesus could find no fault in Nicodemus. Yet, Jesus said to Nicodemus, as Jesus says to you and to me, "You must be born again."

To be born again means a radical change of orientation, for one's center of loyalty, desire, allegiance, worship, changes from self to God, and this is radical surgery. God so loves the world, you and me, that God changes us. In my youth, the church spoke of regeneration. God moves in the human heart, cleansing like a fountain, washing new, regenerating the old heart and making the focus new, centered in Christ. Through Jesus Christ, we are reborn. Jesus Christ works changes in us beyond description.

How? We don't know. Jesus told Nicodemus it is like trying to understand the wind. Who can see the wind, he asked. Yet we can hear the wind. We can see trees and bushes waving because of the wind. We see the results of the wind, but we can't see the wind, or even understand it.

We can't see the Holy Spirit. "You must be born of water and the spirit," said Jesus. Born of water is the first birth, by human parents. Born of spirit is the second birth, by the Holy Spirit. When one is born of the Spirit, you see evidence. Spirit essentially means power. Change from shyness, cowardliness into courage. Spirit means joy, fullness, love, concern for others, outreach. The unregenerated person is joyless, filled with self-righteousness, self-centered, all tied up in legalism and religious observance. The born-again person is joyful, free, courageous, growing in the Lord, filled to overflowing with love, conviction and compassion towards others.

The Christian Century magazine this week contained an article about Nathan and Louise from Macon, Tennessee. Listen to this account of what born-again Christians are like, and how people change. How would you have reacted?

It all started early Tuesday morning, February 21, when Nathan let out the cat. "Cat," as they call him, stood at the edge of the porch, his hair bristled up on his arched back, and he hissed.

"What you see out there, Cat?" Nathan asked.

A big man stepped from around the corner of the house and pointed a shotgun at Nathan.

"Lord, Honey," Louise heard her husband shout. "Open the door, he's got a gun."

Before she could open the door, the man with the gun had shoved Nathan inside, pushing him and Louise against the wall.

"Don't make me kill you!" he shouted, thrusting the gun in their faces. The couple knew immediately that the intruder was one of the escaped inmates from Fort Pillow State Prison whom they had heard about on the radio.

Louise, a 73-year old grandmother, stood her ground. "Young man," she said, "I am a Christian lady. I don't believe in no violence. Put that gun down, and you sit down. I don't allow no violence here."

The man relaxed his grip on the shotgun. He looked at her for a moment. Then he laid his gun on the couch.

"Lady," he said quietly, "I'm so hungry. I haven't had nothing to eat for three days."

"Young man, you just sit down there, and I'll fix you breakfast. Nathan go get this young man some dry socks."

With that, Louise went to work. She fixed him bacon, eggs, toast, milk and coffee. Then she got out her best napkins, and set her kitchen table.

When they sat down, she took that young man by the hand and said, "Young man, let's give thanks that you came here and that you are safe." After breakfast, they sat there, and she began to pray. She held his hand and kept patting him on the leg. He trembled all over. She said, "Young man, I love you and God loves you. God loves us all, every one of us, especially you. Jesus died for you because he loves you so much."

"You sound just like my grandmother," he said. "She's dead." And a tear fell down the boy's cheek.

About that time, they heard police cars coming down the road. "They gonna kill me when they get here," he said.

"No, young man, they aren't going to hurt you. You done wrong, but God loves you." Then Louise and Nathan took him by the arms, helped him up, and took him out of the kitchen toward the door. The police got out of their cars. They had their guns out. She shouted to them, "Y'all put those guns away. I don't allow no violence here. Put them away. This young man wants to go back." Then they put the handcuffs on him and took him back to prison.

Louise may not have complete command of the English language, but she has command of the gospel. She was able to articulate her faith clearly, for she had experienced it, and she lived it. She had the courage to face a difficult situation and not allow "no violence" here. She ministered to the young convict. She fed him; she met his physical needs. Then she ministered to his soul. She touched him. Energy was transmitted. She held his hand. I wonder how long it had been since he had been touched in tenderness. She prayed with him and for him. She spoke to him lovingly and gently about God's love for him. And he was changed. He laid down his gun, faced the police quietly, and went back to prison peacefully.

That same afternoon--contrast the difference--two other escaped convicts entered a backyard where a couple were barbecuing. The husband went into his house and came out with his gun. The convicts shot and killed him and took the woman hostage.

What is the difference? Nathan and Louise, lifelong members of Mount Sinai Primitive Baptist Church, are born again, born of the power, the Spirit, of God. They live with a new orientation, a new way of thinking, new rules, the kingdom of God.

Yes, people, you can change, when God changes you. God can fill you with power, with love, with energy, with the courage to be his people, to reach out in love to anyone. Yes, you can be changed. You can be born again. In fact, you must be born again, to enter the kingdom of heaven.

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