

*Sermon for 2 Lent, Year A
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson
Holy Nativity, Plano
17 February, 2008*

I have two tasks today. Most importantly, I have the same task I have here week in and week out. I try to let God speak from the scripture we have read through me to you. I am sure I don't always perfectly succeed at that, but it's the task to which I submit every week.

But there is another task today, as well. I'm sure you all remember that it's pledge Sunday. And, of course, most of you brought your pledge cards with you, all filled out. Here's mine. But there are probably a few of you who didn't get a pledge card, either because of some administrative mix-up, or because you are a visitor, or because you've never given and your name doesn't appear on our roles. And there are probably a few more of you who dutifully filled out a pledge card, which is now sitting dutifully on your kitchen table, or some such less than helpful place, because you forgot it in the rush to get to church this morning. Not to worry. We have extra pledge cards available for you. [Please pass them out.]

What we're going to do with these is fill them out, committing to give a certain percentage of our income to the work of God in this place. Mine says 10%, because Jenny and I believe that's the biblical standard of faithfulness. So that's what we give. Then we're going to fold them up and place them in the offering basket at the normal time when we come forward for the offertory. If you're not prepared to commit to a certain level of giving this week, I respect that. Take it home and pray about it. Bring it back next week. If you've already mailed it in, or dropped it off, then God bless you. That's fine too. This is not a big number crunching exercise. Nor is it a way for us to manipulate you into giving more. It is a devotional tool for you to use in the practice of the spiritual discipline of giving.

Allow me to return to my primary task and see what today's propers have to say to us in the present context. In St. John's Gospel, we have this strange conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, in which Jesus insists that we must be "born from above", that we must have a spiritual birth as well as a physical one. And it seems that we must receive this new birth from God himself, the Holy Spirit.

And then Jesus goes on to make reference to another strange story about Moses. Back in the book of Numbers, the people were complaining about God's leadership through Moses and they were complaining about the food that God was providing miraculously. So God sent serpents among them, and some of them died from the bites of the serpents. So they did a very odd thing. They repented. And they asked Moses to pray and ask God to save them from the snakes. So God tells Moses to set up the image of a serpent on a pole in the middle of the camp. And anyone who gets bitten by a snake needs to look at the snake on the pole, and God will save his life.

So Jesus says, "I'm like that serpent on the pole." Just like the Israelites were saved when they looked at the bronze serpent, so everyone who trusts in Jesus is saved from death. The Old Testament story is an image of how the New Testament story works. For the Israelites it was merely physical death, for us it's spiritual death. But they both work on faith. Think about it. If I'm an Israelite and I get snake-bit, there's only one reason for me to go look at that bronze serpent: because I trust God and believe that he will heal me. There's no other reason.

In Numbers, God is training his people to trust him. And here in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus claims to be the fulfillment of God's trustworthiness. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever trusts in him should not perish but have eternal life." People disagree on whether Jesus is actually still speaking there in John 3:16. But it is clearly an extension of his statement in the previous verse.

The reason we must be born from above, born of water and the Spirit, is that otherwise we cannot enter the kingdom of God. It seems that, in order to enter the kingdom of God, we must trust in God the Son, who redeemed us. And we cannot really trust in him without having that spiritual birth from God the Holy Spirit.

But why? Why do we need to be "born from above" just to believe in Jesus? It seems clear enough, right? All the evidence is there. If you look closely, you'll find there isn't really any good reason not to believe that Jesus really did live, that he really did say what his followers say that he said, that he really was crucified by the Romans in the manner reported in the Gospels, among other witnesses. One can even make a historical case for the Resurrection. And I have on many occasions. So it seems that we've gotten all the way to belief in Jesus without the help of any supernatural interference, right?

The problem is that that kind of belief isn't what we're talking about. I've spoken before about the richness of this concept in the biblical languages. Belief, here, is the same word as trust. And trust involves all of me, everything I am and everything I do. Abraham is the example of this kind of trust. God tells Abraham, "Just pick up and leave everything that you know, and I'll take care of you." He's seventy-five years old. He has no heir. He lives in a tribal society where family is everything. But what does St. Paul quote from Genesis chapter 15? "Abraham trusted God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." How do we know he trusted God? What did it mean for him to trust God? He went. He did what God asked him to do, even though it scared him. He trusted that God would take care of him, and so he went.

I doubt the Stewardship committee looked at the readings for today when they were setting the schedule for our Stewardship program. They were just trying to set everything up in an appropriate timeline. But surely God transcends all of our little schedules and plans. Over and above and in all of our activity, he is working out his purposes among us. The issue of giving, the issue of the tithe, is an issue of faith and trust. The question before us is this: "Do I really believe that God is going to take care of me? Am I really willing to put my financial fate in his hands and allow *him* to decide how much I have to live on?" You see, anything less than that is not trust, in the full sense.

And this is where the wheels come off, isn't it? It's hard to trust that way! Do you know what I could do with that first ten percent of my income? I could pay my mortgage and property taxes for several months. One of the concerns in our household is how to pay for the education we feel responsible to give our children. But with that first 10%, I could pay for two more girls to go to school. That would solve it. I could fully fund my retirement with that money. I am very familiar with all the things that lay claim to that 10% in our minds and hearts. And you know what? God is also very familiar with all the things that lay claim to that 10% in our minds and hearts. He asks us to give it anyway.

He asks us to do this, not out of wrath and judgment, but out of grace and mercy. "For God sent the Son into the world, *not to condemn the world*, but that the world might be saved through him." God doesn't need our money. But God knows that we need to trust him. And so he chooses to provide for his church according to the faith of his church. When we receive the birth from the Spirit, we are released from our desire for control and security, because we trust God to provide for all of our needs.

The only reason to tithe is that you trust God to take care of you as he has promised to do. It is a gift of God to be able to trust in that way. We joyfully give what God has asked, because we are born from above, children of Abraham, heirs of the promise, members of Christ, subjects of the kingdom of God.