

**Belonging means Born Again**  
**John 3:1-21**

Well friends, our sermon series this month is called “I Belong to Christ AND His body.”

So, we’ll be looking at how our connection with Christ actually connects us to His church; and more importantly we want to be listening to what Jesus has to say to each of us about how we live out that connection with His Church, with His Body here at Valleyview.

Because I think we all have some understanding that being a Christian means working at growing closer to Jesus – but I wonder... if we ever reflect on the fact that being a Christian also means seeking to grow closer to Christ’s Body - to His Church; in the form of a specific group of people in a local congregation like Valleyview?

We probably don’t often think about our relationship with Jesus in this way.

But friends the truth of the matter is that Jesus and His Body are connected, so if we are connected to Jesus then we are also connected to His Body.

Paul describes it in Eph 4:15-16 in this way “*we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ*”

So growing closer to Jesus means maturing as a part of the body.

That is to say if you are truly seeking to go deeper in your relationship with Jesus, at some point you have to go deeper in your relationship with your local Church.

And we can get even more specific and say if you are looking to Valleyview to help you become a mature Christian and grow closer to Jesus... then it’s time to consider how you can grow closer to Valleyview – because friends, Christ and His Church are intimately connected and you can’t grow closer to one without growing closer to the other.

And so to start this series this morning; we've read a large portion of John 3 because this chapter contains a couple of verses and phrases which we have traditionally associated with what it means to grow deeper in our relationship to Jesus – and I'm referring specifically to the phrase *"You must be born again"*

And when we read it as part of the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus – it helps to remove a lot of the stereotypical baggage that has come to be associated with it and it becomes possible to for us to consider that what Jesus said about being "born-again" speaks to us about growing closer to His Church.

Now I don't know what sort of stereotypes pop into your mind when you hear the term "born-again" but I can tell you that for most people they are not positive.

From what I've seen most people associate the term "born-again" with someone who has had a radical conversion experience where they turned away from a lifestyle of 'sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll' or something similar and they have

turned into a straight-laced bible thumper or some sort of Jesus freak, and they are trying to convince everyone else that they need to be "converted" or "born again" as well.

This is the sort of conversion experience that happened to the Paul when he was confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus – but interestingly enough Paul never refers to this conversion experience as being "born-again."

And it's pretty obvious from our scripture reading this morning that no radical conversion experience as such that is taking place as Jesus and Nicodemus are speaking.

So friends – I hope we can see that being "born-again" is not really about having a radical conversion experience, nor do we find grounds in this passage for any other stereo-types that may be associated with it.

Not that having a radical conversion or being a straight-laced bible thumper is necessarily a bad thing – it's just not what Jesus is speaking about when he uses the term "born again."

So with that cleared up – let’s explore this passage, take fresh look at what it means to be born again, and listen for what Jesus has to say to us about our relationship with His church here at Valleyview.

So John 3 starts off by introducing us to Nicodemus – a Pharisee who was a member of the Jewish ruling council who comes to speak with Jesus at night. So let’s look at what’s going on here for a moment.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was someone who was extremely well versed in the Laws of Moses and the ways in which you should live by them, including all the extra traditions of the elders that one should observe to make sure that you didn’t accidentally violate the Law.

To be fair to the Pharisees they didn’t start off with the intention of being so legalistic. Having the Law of Moses was a real gift from God and there are plenty of places in the Psalms where the Law of God is praised as the way to find life...

In fact Psalm 119, the longest of all Psalms is an A-Z song about how the Psalmist loves God’s Law because it brings blessing and life.

That was God’s intention *“Keep my decrees and laws, for the person who obeys them will **live** by them. I am the Lord.”*

Leviticus 18:5 Law was life!

Law was the means by which God reigned in the lives of His people Israel and protected them from their enemies and kept them safe in the Promised Land where they belonged.

But when the Law the violated and the Covenant was broken Israel’s life was miserable because they were outside God’s Law and his protection there was no life... they were attacked, oppressed and killed by their enemies.

Eventually their disobedience led to the loss of their Land, they were taken away from where they belonged and sent into exile.

And now many years later... God's people were once again living in the Land which had once belonged to them and had been the Kingdom of their ancestors.

Even though they were ruled by the Roman Empire, they still believed and hoped that one day their obedience to God's Law would result in God re-establishing them as the nation of Israel, His chosen people, His Kingdom...

and so the Jewish ruling council, made up of Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Chief Priests, taught the people strict and legalistic obedience to the Laws of Moses, the traditions of the Elders and worship at the Temple... in expectation that it would lead to regaining the blessing of life from God in the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel.

And were always looking for that person through whom God would work restore the Kingdom of Israel.

Just as God had sent the Judges in the past to rescue Israel from oppression, and had appointed King Saul, King David,

King Solomon and their successors to establish a Kingdom, the scriptures foretold that God would send a savior – a Messiah to re-establish Israel as the Kingdom of God, and this is why Nicodemus is visiting with Jesus.

Rumors of a Rabbi named Jesus who was doing great miracles and healings had made their way to the Jewish Ruling Council in Jerusalem and Nicodemus wonders if this might be the Messiah they've been waiting for, well – it certainly needs to be investigated.

So Nicodemus goes to speak with Jesus to see who He really is.

And He does so at night to keep this preliminary investigation quiet. A visit during the day would be too high-profile... it wouldn't do to have the crowds thinking that his visit meant that the Sanhedrin was endorsing Jesus as Messiah before they could really confirm it.

There had been lots of false Messiahs, and these men hadn't brought in a kingdom – only the anger of Rome who executed them for rebellion. So the Sanhedrin wasn't interested in being seen as officially oppose Roman rule in any way until the actual Messiah came along.

Additionally night time meant a break from the crowds for Jesus, so Nicodemus would be available to speak at length with Him to determine whether He might warrant the support of the Sanhedrin or not.

So Nicodemus says to Jesus *“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.”*

Nicodemus is dropping the hint to Jesus that with the right proof of divine approval there are those in the Sanhedrin who would be willing to support Jesus' as a potential Messiah.

His words leave the door wide open for Jesus to respond with what further proof he may have, or explain how He fulfills certain messianic prophecies and so on...

But in his reply Jesus cuts right past all the political posturing and essentially tells Nicodemus,

“Look, I know why you've come to see me... you're here to determine if I'm the one who is going to deliver Israel from Roman Rule and establish the Kingdom of Israel – and you want to offer your support to help bring in the Kingdom of God... well I'll tell you what....

*“no one can even see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again!”* What!?! What did Jesus say?

With one brief reply Jesus undercuts Nicodemus' agenda and establishes himself as much more than a teacher and reveals Nicodemus as someone who needs much more than an explanation...

Remember friends, at that time you were part of God's chosen people because you had been born into it – because you were a child of Abraham and an heir to the promise, certainly

Gentiles were able to obey God's law as well – but their birth would always mark them as having come in from the outside.

So Nicodemus would have believed that his birth, his training as Pharisee, his observance of the Law, his position on the Sanhedrin would all be significant reasons for him to have leadership role of some sort in the restoration of the nation of Israel that would be the Kingdom of God – its why he was there to speak with Jesus in the first place...

So for Jesus to tell Nicodemus that he had to be “born again” was to tell Him that all the qualifications and privileges which he would have assumed came with being born a Jew weren't going to do anything for him in the Kingdom of God.

In fact He couldn't even see the Kingdom of God. His idea of what the Kingdom of God was, based on his birthrights, was so far off he needed to conceive of something entirely different.

So friends as we are listening in all this for what Jesus wants to say to us about growing closer to His church it might be

something like this... “I tell you the truth; no one can really understand what the Church is all about unless they are born again.”

This means that whatever we might bring to our relationship with the church by virtue of our birth will not help us become mature members of the Body of Christ.

Whatever might be ours through nature or nurture – such being born and raised in a good stable family to be an honest, upright and moral person, or having leadership or business skills, musical ability or a good singing voice, charm and personality, being a kind and caring person, or having money or resources... won't bring us closer to the Church.

Our birthrights might make it easier to feel comfortable in a church, having been born into it and grown up with it – we are familiar with it.

They may give us opportunity to do things in a church, we might be able to support the ministries of a church, we might even be able to work for the church.

But none of these things that we can bring to the table will actually help us to grow closer to the Church and become mature members who grow up into the head that is Christ.

In fact - if we hear the challenge of this sermon series, first and foremost as a call to get more involved, to do more, or give more, or attend more then we really don't see the Church for what it actually is – we're not really seeing it as the Body of Christ.

We may be seeing it like any other organization that we're used to being a part of and being involved in like our school, our workplace, our hockey team, or our dance group, or the Rec Center, or our community association and so on...

If this is the case Jesus is saying to us – the church is something so completely different than what you are used to participating in based on what you were born with.

Consider the implications of this for a moment friends and you'll begin to understand the confusion which Nicodemus must felt when Jesus said to him *“Truly I tell you no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again!”*

It sounded ridiculous to Nicodemus? So he asks an equally ridiculous question back *“Is a man supposed to enter his mother's womb a second time to be born again?”*

Nicodemus isn't seeking so much to understand what this second birth could be... as much as he's protesting the incredulity that his ethnicity as a Jew, his training as a Pharisee, his position in the Sanhedrin could have nothing to do with the Kingdom of God.

Friends we may find it equally incredulous to hear that our birthrights – our natural gifts and talents and will not

contribute in any way to us becoming mature members of Christ's Church, that flies against what we experience in every other organization we are a part of – but its true.

Now the good news is that Jesus doesn't leave Nicodemus hanging for an answer here.

He explains that being a part of the Kingdom of Heaven requires that you are born of water and the Spirit – which is Jesus' way of referencing John the Baptist's testimony in John 1: 29-34 to Jesus ministry as the Messiah. Listen to what John the Baptist says...

*'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me. I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.'* Then John gave this testimony: *"I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come*

*down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'*

And now Jesus says *"No one can enter the Kingdom of Heaven unless they are born of Water and the Spirit..."*

So for Nicodemus this would mean being baptized by John to repent for breaking God's Law - unthinkable for someone so meticulous and careful in their observance of it.

Additionally He would be required to look to the one John proclaimed would bring the Spirit of Life, thus conceding that the legalistic observance of the Law was not the way to life, nor would it be rewarded by God through the re-establishing of Israel as a Kingdom.

Now – the question for is what Jesus saying to us about our relationship with His Church through this?

*"No one can become a mature part of my Body unless they are born of water and the Spirit..."*



So friends this is plain and simple – if you want to grow closer to Jesus... get baptized into His Church.

In Baptism the Church uses water to symbolize how Christ pours out His Spirit upon us – and when the Spirit is poured out on us we are reborn and connected to everyone else who is reborn.

Friends Christ wants us to know that we need his Spirit – for as much as we may be involved in Valleyview with our birthrights and our skills and talents and whatever else we naturally possess – we need His Spirit poured out upon us.

Only when we are born again by the Holy Spirit will we be able to start to really grow closer to each other, to the Church – because we share the same Spirit, the same life...

Friends – on a natural level we may or may not connect very well with each other, we may or may not have common interests or things to talk about – but when we share the Life

of the Spirit we are connected together in a way that brings us closer than anything else can.

This is the starting point for us to see the Church for what is really is, for us to understand what it means to be born again and why nothing we bring to the table from birth can accomplish what the Spirit of God can in our lives through His rebirth.

So friends, this month it's about how we belong to Christ AND his Body – that if we want to grow closer to Christ we need to take steps to grow closer to His Body – specifically looking at what that means for our connection to Valleyview.

From what we've learned today we can say that Belonging to the Church means being born again in the true biblical sense of that phrase, and being baptized... and that both are dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit.

So friends – what do you hear Jesus saying to you about growing closer in your relationship with Valleyview through this?

Do you need to get baptized? Do you need to help your children get baptized?

Are you wanting to know how you can be certain that you're experiencing a spiritual rebirth?

Are you willing to open yourself up and ask Jesus to pour more of His Holy Spirit upon you and fill you?

Will you come and speak to your minister about what Jesus is saying to you? So I can help you take the steps you need to take...

I pray you would friends – and it would be my privilege to help you – Let me pray for us....