

***Easter Worship Series: Resurrection Love: The Great Privilege***

***Sermon Title: A New Childhood***

***Luke 24:36b-48; Acts 3:12-19; 1 John 3:1-7***

***Salem United Methodist Church; April 15, 2018***

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The dyed Easter eggs and the candy are all eaten, but in the church it is still Easter. We continue to celebrate this big deal called the Resurrection. From the first moment the disciples experienced the risen Christ, they have recognized it as a great privilege. They recognized that something huge was happening and they were a part of it. They recognized that a change was occurring just as Jesus had told them and it was happening to them.

None of us remember our lives before we were born, nor do we remember our births. Our parents may have told us the circumstances around our births, but we don't remember when we first took our first breath. Before our first breath, we lived in a warm, dark, secure water environment in which we were constantly nourished. We could not see because there was no light. We could not hear distinctly because our ears were filled with water. We could feel or sense the constant beating of our mother's heart. It was all we ever knew, the thump, da-thump, da-thump. And we were warm as we floated in weightlessness, stretching and tumbling making our mothers uncomfortable. Then one day we were either pushed or pulled into air which was much colder than our mother's womb. The pressure of the colder air forces us to take that first breath. And we are born. Our eyes open as we see light for the first time. Our ears hear voices clearly. We can feel the touch of our mothers, fathers, siblings, grandparents, and anyone else who holds us. We smell those who are cradling us in their arms. Our taste buds are activated as we taste the sweetness of the milk that was fed to us. And we experience hunger for the first time. All of our senses came alive as we take that first breath of life. Our life before birth is different from the life after our birth. At our birth we become awakened to a new world.

And so it is with the one that is born of God, John Wesley wrote in a sermon called, "The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God." Remember what Jesus said to Nicodemus who came to him in the middle of the night when he asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said that he had to be born again. The word used for again is *anōthen* which means from above or from God. And Nicodemus could not imagine going through the birthing process again as a grown man. So Jesus explains it to him and we are not quite sure if Nicodemus understands. John Wesley explained being born of God this way. Before we are born of God we exist in God. We live, and move, and have our being, but we don't know God exists. Just like a baby in utero doesn't know his/her mother exists. We have no consciousness of God's presence. We are not aware of the "divine breath of life," of which we cannot exist for a moment, much like our mother's breath provides the needed oxygen for both hers and the baby's bloodstream. God continually calls us, talks to us like a mother does the child in utero, but our ears do not hear. Our eyes are not able to see and we live in darkness. Wesley said there may be some awareness of spiritual things, but we cannot discern them yet. However, the spiritual world is all around him/her, similar to the mother's womb surrounding the baby.

Wesley wrote, "But when one is born of God, born of the Spirit, how the manner of one's existence has changed! One's whole soul is now sensible of God. The Spirit or breath of God is immediately inspired, breathed into the new-born soul; and the same breath which comes from, returns to, God." Our life before our spiritual births is different from the life after. Wesley states that when we are born of the Spirit our eyes are opened to seeing the invisible God. All the darkness is passed away and we are born into God's light. We see God's mercy that reconciles us through Jesus who Wesley called, "the son of God's love." Our ears are opened so we can hear the voice of God and we want to obey it. All of our spiritual senses are awakened as we experience the peace, joy, and love of God in our hearts offered to us through the Resurrection of Jesus. With our spiritual births we become the children of God who are loved like a parent loves his/her children. Wesley doesn't say how we are born. I would venture to say that just as each of our physical births were different, yet similar, if we would compare our spiritual births with each other we would find that they are similar, yet different. And some of us are still in the process of being born of God.

We see this spiritual birth happening as a process for the followers of Jesus. On that first day of the Resurrection, those who were witnesses of the Resurrected Jesus were not comprehending what was happening. Just to see the crucified, dead, and buried Jesus standing before them was a shock. He was changed somehow, yet he was the same. They could touch him and see him. They even witnessed him eating. Scientifically we do not understand the Resurrection. From what the Bible tells us Jesus was dead, yet he wasn't a resuscitated body as we now have the capability of doing with CPR or a defibrillator. He was changed, a glorified body. It is as though this fully human, fully divine being became even more divine in human form. For his followers seeing him in this state they needed to use their senses to seek understanding. And once again, Jesus tells them what it takes to have a spiritual birth—repent and receive forgiveness. The lives of these first hand witnesses of the resurrected Lord would never be the same. The spiritual birth was beginning and later, they would become midwives to the spiritual births of others.

Peter is a prime example of a midwife to spiritual births. His spiritual birth began on that first Sunday and was completed fifty days later at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Through his preaching and through talking with people one on one, thousands receive this spiritual birth and became children of God. Peter's message remains consistent with the message of the resurrected Jesus. He called people to turn back to God and receive forgiveness for sins.

About fifty years after the Resurrection of Jesus, the author of the first Epistle of John, which more than likely was not the Apostle John, but could have been a disciple of his, coined the term, "children of God." There are some who welcome this term. To be a child of God means that we are loved by the Creator of the Universe. This is quite humbling, really, and what an honor. To be included with this group called the children of God means we are not an only child. We exist in a family with brothers and sisters. While there are others who do not welcome these terms, "child of God," or "children of God." We tend to relate to God in terms of our parents and our families of origin. Some have had loving parents, while others have not. So relating to God as a parent, father or mother, is difficult and even challenging. Let's face it all of our families have quirks, rough edges, and dysfunctions of one type or another. After all every family member is human.

I say to anyone who struggles with the terms, "child of God" or "children of God," these are terms of endearment, terms of love. If anyone has not felt loved by a parent or harmed in any way, know this. You already exist in the Perfect Parent. You already live, and move, and have your being in God. You already exist because of the divine breath of life. God is already talking to you, caring to you, looking out for you. You are already loved by a perfect, unconditional love. God waits for you to turn and say, "Here I am, your child." This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus, to be a Christian, to receive our spiritual birth, to become a beloved child of God.

Today, the term, "Christian," is misused, abused, and misunderstood in our world. Some believers are even shying away from the term. In 1988, Carol Wimmer felt misunderstood as a Christian so she wrote this poem. "When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I'm not shouting, 'I've been saved!' I'm whispering, 'I get lost sometimes, That's why I chose this way.' When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I don't speak with human pride I'm confessing that I stumble—needing God to be my guide. When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I'm not trying to be strong, I'm professing that I'm weak and pray for strength to carry on. When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I'm not bragging of success, I'm admitting that I've failed and cannot ever pay the debt. When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I don't think I know it all, I submit to my confusion asking humbly to be taught. When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I'm not claiming to be perfect, My flaws are far too visible but God believes I'm worth it. When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I still feel the sting of pain, I have my share of heartache which is why I seek God's name. When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I do not wish to judge, I have no authority I only know I'm loved."

Know that you are loved.

**Resources:** "The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God" by John Wesley; "When I Say I am a Christian," by Carol Wimmer