

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## SONS BEGET SONS Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Jesus said: "...no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above;" and "...no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit;" and elsewhere, "What is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:3,5,6).

St. Paul wrote: "...those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:24-25).

As birth and death define the limits of physical life, death and birth define our new life in Christ. Birth is the process of bringing that which is not into that which is. And in simplest terms, death is the opposite.

Death to us seems so final – a person dies and he is no more. We can talk about our memories, but that person is not our memories. So when we read that we must die to self in order to be born into the kingdom of God, we tend to think in metaphorical terms or just superficially accept it as more religious jargon. However, when we do so, we ignore the radical nature of the transformation that is necessary for us to live in a reconciled relationship with God.

Let me try to explain why this death, this negation of our being, is so important for us as Christians by taking you into my world of ideas.

The position of Senior Pastor is one that requires both vision casting and leadership in the practical working out of that vision by the community. Often it falls to the Pastor to provide specific guidance as to the path the congregation should take in order to fulfill God's will for that parish. Everything is fine until there is an obstacle in the path or the path simply disappears. At that point the Pastor has three choices: 1) continue on blazing a new trail continuing the trajectory of the path; 2) modify the course by looking around for a likely continuation of the path in some other direction; or 3) go back and reevaluate the proper path. In my case, the first two options are a reflection of my unwillingness to abandon my original action plan. Indeed, I find that once I get a "good" idea in my mind, and have decided on the "right" path, it is hard for me to see other possibilities that do not include that idea. What I have to do if I am to effectively address the problem is to completely put the original idea out of my mind and begin anew. That is the only way in which I can be open to the possibility of a new idea or a new direction. It is also the only way I can avoid replacing God's way with my way. That approach is the third option – go back to where I started and begin again. I need to let the first idea die so that a new idea might be born, whether it ends up being similar or very different from the original.

In this life, we naturally do things according to the way of the flesh. Our experience as human beings is convincing evidence that we are self-centered, greedy and thoroughly competitive when left to our own devices. Like the Pharisee, Nicodemus, in his conversation with Jesus, we try to clean up who we are and put a new coat of paint on our attitudes and the actions that we

take. But as Jesus says elsewhere, by doing so we are just whitewashing the tombs. We are better looking but still full of dead flesh on the inside.

The only way to live our lives in a new God-like manner is to start over – to die to the flesh, our natural way, and be re-born by the Spirit, into our new and supernatural life. This is the life that is distinguished by the Godly, other-centered traits of love, reconciliation and generosity.

When we are born again, we are born into the kingdom of God as first-born sons of God; and therefore, full heirs of his kingdom. The resulting difference should be seen in the way we live our lives. Not only will we manifest the fruit of the Spirit, but through that fruit we will propagate the kingdom.

Have you ever asked yourself the question, what is the purpose of fruit? In nature, fruit is the manner in which trees propagate. The fruit is attractive to animals that eat the fruit and then distribute the seeds on the ground. When the seeds germinate they take root and another tree is born, more fruit results, and the cycle repeats itself year in and year out. Trees beget trees through their fruit.

As sons of the kingdom, our fruit should be different and attractive to the sons of the world. Even the most self-centered, decadent and violent person does not find his traits attractive in another person. We all desire relationships where we are valued, loved and can trust the other person – where someone seems to truly care about us and look after our best interests. So, the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – should be very unique and attractive in this world of competition, oppression and betrayal. Of course, the seed at the center of the fruit of the Spirit is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When the fruit is shared, the seed is released and the kingdom spreads. It is through our fruit, the fruit of the Spirit, that we as sons of the kingdom beget more sons of the kingdom.

Anglican Archbishop Josiah Idowu-Fearon of northern Nigeria describes this process through a song that Christians sing in his part of Nigeria.

God forgives my sins in Jesus' name.  
I've been born again in Jesus' name.  
And in Jesus' name I come to you  
To share his love as he told me to.

He said, "Freely, freely you have received.  
Freely, freely you are to give."  
Go in my name and because you believe,  
Others will know that I live.

God's original command to humankind in the Garden was "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). And his original command has never changed. We are to be fruitful and multiply the kingdom.

Sin made us fruitless – dead for the kingdom. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we are forgiven and reborn in the Spirit so that we may become fruitful again. And through our fruitfulness we once again can obey our Father's command to be fruitful and multiply sons for the kingdom of God. As trees beget trees in this world, in the kingdom, sons beget sons.

Let us pray.

We thank you Father for our adoption as sons and full heirs of your kingdom. May we live fully into our sonship by being reborn by your Spirit. Help us to put off the old self completely so that we can be recreated in your image. Make us fruitful for the kingdom and empower us to spread your kingdom in the world through exhibiting the qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in our lives. Keep us close – keep us faithful – and keep us fruitful we pray. Amen.

*Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, on June 27, 2010, the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 8, Year C.*