

Faith Questions: Can I Let Jesus Make Me Uncomfortable? Sunday, 2/25/18

1 You no doubt heard this week that Billy Graham passed away at the age of 99 years. How many of you have either watched or attended an event where Billy Graham was preaching? I can't say I was too keen on his use of the term "crusade," but I did attend his last big event at the Metrodome in June of 1996. If you've seen or read about Billy Graham, then you know that he was famous for his blunt and unashamed Biblical preaching and his altar calls. When I heard Billy Graham preach in 1996, I had already made a decision to follow Jesus. But when the inevitable altar call came, I was one of the thousands who got up out of the bleachers, walked down to the field, and prayed with a volunteer that I might give my life to Christ again. Is there anyone else here today who's had a similar experience?

That and other similar moments from my walk with God raise some curious questions about salvation. Was I saved that night? Was I saved the first time I made that decision? Was I saved when I was baptized as an infant? Just what or who, exactly, determines whether I'm saved or damned? Those are pretty important questions, and I'm guessing that I'm not the only one here who's asked them.

Today we're continuing our Lenten journey of asking ourselves faith questions. Although the questions themselves sometimes suggest yes-or-no answers, the real action for us isn't so much in the answers as in the asking ourselves the questions. If you haven't yet received one of these mirror cards, be sure to pick one up in the lobby. Let this mirror, or any other mirror you peer into this Lenten season, be a reminder to you to intentionally reflect on your walk with God. Let the mirrors in your life guide you into a closer walk with Jesus, preparing your heart for Easter.

2 Our question for reflection today is "Can I let Jesus make me uncomfortable?" There are many ways in which we might be made uncomfortable by a close and honest examination of the life and teachings of Jesus, and only you can know where your greatest discomfort lies. I'm convinced that we're called as Christians to live with a certain amount of divine discontent with the way the world is, the way we are in the world, and our current understanding of and relationship with Jesus and God's Kingdom on earth. Allowing ourselves to be uncomfortable with Jesus means that we can be honest in wrestling with the differences between the way we are and the way we believe God wants us to be. Allowing

ourselves to be uncomfortable with Jesus also means that we can be honest in facing our lack of loving action in the world despite the systemic evil and injustices that rage across this planet. The school shootings in Florida are just one of the sad headlines that we all too often leave behind when we throw our papers into the recycling bin.

Can I let Jesus make me uncomfortable? I hope the answer is yes, because I need a little urgency in my life to fuel the changes I need to grow closer to Jesus and surprise the world with grace. To his credit, Nicodemus endured more than a little discomfort in his visit to Jesus under the cover of night. Let's continue that narrative, picking up in verse 9 of chapter three.

{Read John 3:9-18, NIV}.

3 Nicodemus caught a pretty hard rebuke from Jesus for his denseness in this exchange, all centered on his failure to understand what Jesus meant by “born again,” or to translate that more literally, “born for above.” Bear in mind that, unlike so many of the other encounters that Jesus has with Pharisees in the Gospels, Nicodemus wasn't there to indict Jesus or trip him up- he wanted to learn more about who this Jesus was. Nicodemus apparently just didn't understand what Jesus was saying and interpreted his words about birth literally. To his credit, he persevered and endured this uncomfortable encounter with Jesus, wrestling with his understanding even as Jesus soundly scolded him for not understanding that Jesus was talking about something altogether different than some kind of holy maternity ward. Incidentally, if you were born in 1918 like Billy Graham, you might have been born in a maternity ward like this one!

4 If Jesus wasn't talking about our birthdays when he said we must be born again by water and the Spirit, then was he talking about our baptisms? Yeas and no! Baptisms meant many different things back then, and to some extent, they still do today. Jewish Pharisees like Nicodemus would have been well aware that Gentile converts to Judaism were baptized with water in order to purify them from past acts- like eating pork- that would have made them ceremoniously unclean. John the Baptizer showed up on the scene with a different kind of baptism, baptizing with water as a call to repentance, with immersion in the Jordan River symbolizing a death to a life of unrighteous behavior and a rebirth to a life of righteousness.

To make matters even more confusing, Jesus was baptized by John, not for

repentance- Jesus didn't have any unrighteousness to repent of- but as a sign of his divine authority and the beginning of his ministry. Jesus was the first to be baptized by both water and the Spirit, the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. And then to add yet another form of baptism, Jesus later commanded that we baptize others with water and the Spirit, saying "Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."¹ All of these baptisms in Scripture, with the exception of the baptism of Jesus, point to a form of conversion, from one way of life to another.

5 Our modern-day baptism liturgies make a direct connection with this teaching of Jesus in John 3 as well as the commandment of Jesus that we baptize others in Matthew 28. At our baptism last month, I said, "Patrick, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Do you see the connection there with Matthew? Then I said, "The Holy Spirit work within you, that being born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ." And there's the connection with John 3- "water and the Spirit."

We might just as well say in that liturgy, "being Reborn through water and the Spirit." In many ways, a baptism at any age is a mark of being reborn, by water and the spirit. The Apostle Paul made that connection in his letter to the church in Rome: "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."²

We get uncomfortable, and more than a little confused, with this language of being "born again" for a number of reasons. Some of us recoil when we hear that phrase because it was co-opted by political operatives of the religious right. Some of us associate "born again" Christians with the kind of evangelism that seems more intent on scoring conversions than caring for people. But another kind of confusion results when we try to reconcile our practice of infant baptism with the clear teaching of Jesus that we will be saved when we

¹ Matthew 28:19, NLT

² Romans, 6:3-4, NIV

confess with our mouths and believe in our hearts that Jesus is Lord.³ I haven't met any talking newborns, have you?

6 In the last month I presided over both the wedding of Claire Daleiden and the baptism of her nephew, Patrick. I see many parallels between marriage and baptism that help me understand the meaning of being born again. Both baptism and marriage are covenants with God in which a person or persons make promises to God, a community makes promises to God, and God promises to be present in a special way. In both marriage and baptism, the human parties entering into the covenant are not perfectly prepared to keep their end of the deal. I point out to every bride and groom that no matter how mature they are, they'll never be able to keep their marriage covenant without God. Essentially, every bride and groom must be "born from above" in their marriage, if not by water then by the Spirit. The same thing applies to baptism. There is absolutely no age at which any one of us is able to make and keep a baptism covenant without God's grace going before us, with us, and after us. That's the beautiful thing about infant baptism. It reminds us that we all need and receive grace, no matter what our age.

And one more parallel. Just as people fail to keep their marriage covenants, so too we often fail to keep our baptismal covenants, turning away from Christ and indulging in self-centered behaviors. Does that mean we were never "born from above," never fully converted, never saved? I doubt it. People enter covenants with great sincerity and fail, again and again. That's the record of humanity recorded in the Bible. What's different for us, as Christians, is that we put our hope in the grace of Jesus Christ. The Christian life is one of waking up each morning and allowing our hearts to be converted to Christ all over again, and then seeking the power and grace of God's Holy Spirit to live that conversion in the attitudes and actions of each day.

7 Can you let Jesus make you uncomfortable? I hope the answer is yes. Billy Graham was famous for saying, "This is your hour of decision." It was such a signature statement that his weekly radio broadcast took that title, "Hour of Decision." It doesn't matter how many times you've given your life to Christ, each day can be filled with hours of decision,

³ Romans 10:9

times we choose to lay down our preferences and priorities for the sake of serving Christ and loving our neighbors. As you leave the sanctuary today, I'll be standing with this bowl of water and if you like, I'll place some water on your head or your hand and invite you to remember your baptism.

I want to give you one more way to respond to God this morning. Every Billy Graham sermon ended with an altar call, an invitation to respond to the hour of decision. As you listen to this altar call that he gave in 1958, and if you want to respond to the call of the Spirit on your heart to renew your desire to be "born from above," I invite you to come forward and stand before the cross. Here's the call from Reverend Graham:

[In the book of Acts] there were some that made a decision... They received Christ and went their way rejoicing. I am going to ask you today to receive Him. I am not asking you ...to join some special church. I'm asking you today to give your life to Christ. I don't know who you are or what you are, but you want to give your life to Christ... I'm going to ask you to do a hard thing, because coming to Christ is not easy.. Jesus went to the cross and died in your place. Certainly, you can come a few steps from where you are sitting and stand here, quietly and reverently, and with bowed head. And say, "I need God; I need Christ. I want to be forgiven of my sins. I want a new life, and I want to start a new direction today." You may be a rich [person]; you may be a poor [person]. You may be a [person] of great intellectual capacities, and you have to come by faith [, b]ecause you'll never understand it all intellectually. ...[C]ome to the cross and give your life to Christ.⁴

I invite you to take some time to reflect on how God may be speaking to you this morning. You can as always share a prayer or comment on the back of your response card, but if the Spirit is stirring your heart, then you come forward, right now, and I'll lead you in prayer.

Most holy God, we do need you. We need Jesus. We ask for an assurance of the forgiveness of our sins. Create in us a new life, born from above. Lead us in a new direction today, filled with your Spirit, carrying your love. Amen.

⁴ <http://www.jesuschristonly.com/sermons/billy-graham/christs-answer-to-the-world.html>



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...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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