

**"Born From Above"**  
**Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
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Watching some of our cable television stations often takes me back to my time of growing up in the mid to late 1970s. This was a time when classic comedy television was bringing into our homes much of the social change that was happening outside our homes. Sanford and Sons, The Jeffersons and even Soul Train were bringing African American culture and traditions into our world. The Brady Bunch introduced the first nontraditional blended family into mainstream culture—a blended family that hinted at, but never quite said, that there was a divorce in the mix. Chico and the Man, starring Jack Albertson and Freddie Prinze, gave mainstream audiences an early taste of Hispanic culture.

Then, in a slightly different vein, there was the Bob Newhart Show which gave us a glimpse into the newly-emerging therapeutic culture. Now, in this show, Bob Newhart played the role of a psychologist having to deal with his clients and his fellow office workers. The Bob Newhart show was hilarious, largely because of Bob Newhart himself and his dry sense of humor, but also because of his patients.

In one of his most famous episodes, we find Bob Newhart in his office waiting for his next client, and if you were to see this episode, you would notice that it starts out with Bob Newhart washing his hands (always washing his hands because he had his own dilemmas in his life), but when his client comes in, it is a young woman by the name of Katherine Bigman, and he explains to her that he charges \$5 for the first five minutes of therapy and then absolutely nothing after that. As you can imagine, the client is a little surprised, and she says "That sounds almost too good to be true", to which he replies "Well, I can almost guarantee you it won't last the whole five minutes", so with a little awkwardness between them, Bob Newhart encourages her to share her problems, to which she says, "Well, I have this fear of being buried alive in a box, and I can't think of being in anything boxy without getting really panicked". Bob says "So, what you are saying is, is that you're claustrophobic". "Yes, that's it". "Well, all right Katherine", Bob says, "let's go now". I'm going to say two words to you right now, and I want you to listen to these two words very, very carefully, and I want you to take them out of the office with you and incorporate them into your life". Katherine, sort of nervously playing with her purse like she's trying to get something out of her purse, asks "Should I write them down?" Bob says "Well, if it makes you comfortable you can, but I have found that most people can remember these two words", so she says "Okay". Bob then says "Are you ready? Here they are—STOP IT!". Katherine asked, "Stop it?". "Yes, stop it—S-T-O-P, new word, I-T. Stop it". She asked, "Stop being afraid of being buried alive in a box?". "You've got it Katherine. Good job. Well, it's only been three minutes, so you only owe me \$3. "

Now, of course we all know that this is television comedy, and we know that people who have claustrophobia and other fears have very real needs for professional help, but within the comedy of this episode, there is also a very real kernel of truth. That truth is that all of us engage in behaviors that are, in the least, compromising of the way that we would like to live and, in the extreme, self-destructive of our lives. While the advice to just "stop it" is simplistic at best, when it comes to thinking about, and evaluating, our lives and the way we live and our journey with God, identifying the behaviors that we need to stop is a good first step in the process of being born from above.

So, in Chapter 3 of John this morning, we have this story of the Pharisee, Nicodemus, who is wondering about where God is in his life. He is a leader of the Jews who comes in the dark. In the Gospel of John, night time is used, metaphorically, to represent a fundamental separation from God. Nicodemus has lost his relationship with God and is seeking renewal because he needs to be born from above, so he seeks out Jesus with hopes of a new connection with the Divine. Jesus says to Nicodemus "Truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, without being born of water and the Spirit" and Nicodemus doesn't get it. He starts talking about re-entering a mother's womb. He is a literalist, and he is missing the point of Jesus'

wisdom.

Now, I suspect that some of us are like Nicodemus. That is to say that some of us long to be reborn. We feel disconnected from God, and we dream about and hope that one day God will initiate a great intervention into our lives, that God will “zap” us with the Spirit and that this transformation will just come to us, requiring no initiative on our part. We will be rescued from our “stuckness”. We will be rescued from the quiet desperation within which we live our lives, and I think that type of Godly intervention where God comes down and “zaps” us can happen on occasion, but I also think that most of the time it doesn’t happen that way. Most of the time it doesn’t happen that way because we have put too much “stuff” between our lives and God’s intent for our lives. There is too much in between the way we live and the way that God would have us live. So, in order to clean up that mess that lies between the lives that we live, the lives that we long to live, and the life that God would intend for us to live, there are at least, I think, two things that we must do to clean out that mess and one is (using the words of Bob Newhart), stop it. Stop the things that compromise our lives. Stop the things that we do that take us away from God. Stop the behaviors and habits which honor nothing and no one except our own selfish desires. Whatever those are...whatever those behaviors and habits are...God says, stop it.

I am always intrigued by people I meet along life’s journey (and perhaps I even engage in this at the same time), people who talk about a negative characteristic of their lives, or of their way of living, or of their personality, and they say “Well, that’s just the way I am. I just can’t help myself. That’s just the way I do it.” What I find ironic about that is that they know the way they behave that destroys relationships in their lives. They know the words or the things they say that really turn people off. They know the way they act and yet “It’s just me”, but that’s where those words “stop it” are so appropriate because we know things in our lives that we continue to do and continue to do that keep sabotaging the way that we want to live. So, staying “stop it” to those things that destroy our lives is a first step to being born from above.

Now, the second thing I see as part of being born from above is not just to stop, but to go. To “go” in life means to go into new things, to move out of our comfort zones, to engage in activities and experiences that reinforce not what makes us comfortable or reinforce our own world view, but things that open up new realities for us, because when we open up new realities, when we get to new places, when we have new experiences, we are also encountering a new reality through which God can operate, and we allow ourselves to grow. We allow ourselves new self-understanding, and we have the potential and possibility for transformation when we get out of our comfort zones.

To put it in simple terms, it is the refrain, if we don’t change the way we live, our lives will never change. If we don’t change the way we live, our lives will never change. I have sat with certain people in our churches. I have sat with people who come back again and again with the same litany of problems and, when asked “Well, have you changed?” they say “Well, not really—just kind of doing the same old thing and I’m waiting for a different result”. I think God works in our lives when we open ourselves up to new possibilities because what we are always trying to do (and it’s probably part of human nature) is create a comfortable place for ourselves. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with that unless it becomes what we always do, unless it just becomes a hiding place for our lives.

This is a story about changing realities: In the summer of 1994, I spent a day touring around the city of East St. Louis. Some of you know, or perhaps you don’t know, that East St. Louis is on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River, and it is part of the St. Louis metropolitan area. East St. Louis is a neighborhood that I would never go into alone. It is a city of 27,000 residents. Those are the ones who have remained there. It is 98% African American. It has a median income of \$21,000 per household. That is median. It routinely has the highest crime rates in the United States. It is the location of numerous toxic waste sites that are left there from industries that have lost since left, and it has an unemployment rate (regardless of how the larger economy is doing) of about 20%. East St. Louis is a city of disaster. So, when I went into this tour of the city with church folks and ministers and representatives from East St. Louis, I went into this tour with a good

amount of fear, and I had all kinds of preconceived notions.

While many of the social and economic realities of East St. Louis were true, what I learned there opened up my mind. I found out that there were churches there with real people, working very hard to try to create opportunities for their young people. I heard testimonies from mothers and fathers who had lost children to gang violence, who wept about their children just like I would have wept. I talked with people who had their homes built by Habitat for Humanity, who had enormous pride in their houses and were proud that they, too, helped build their houses, just like I would be proud of my home. So, in the course of my day in East St. Louis, a place very foreign to my life experience, I had learned and I had grown, and I had seen God at work there, too, and I don't think my presence changed anything, but East St. Louis changed me. It changed me to think that God is actually at work in the worst neighborhoods, that God works through all kinds of people, and most of all it took me out of my comfort zone to show me that there is another way, that there is another reality out there different from mine. It lent, in a small way, to some transformation—at least in my thinking.

So, when we hear Paul, as he talks to the Christians in Rome and says "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind:", he is encouraging us. Don't be content with what you think the world is like. Don't be content with simplistic versions of what God is doing or is not doing, or can do or can't do. Change the way you live. Change what you are doing. Stop that which takes you away from God and begin that which takes you into God's world. Mix it up. That is how we grow. We grow in faith. We grow in our understanding of God. We grow in our understanding of the human family by encountering them.

It seems that Nicodemus never quite understood what Jesus was getting at. Perhaps he didn't quite know what he needed to stop in his life. Perhaps he didn't quite have the courage to start new ways of living. Perhaps Nicodemus was stuck, but the promise is there for him, and the promise is there for us. Being born from above is partly out of our control. It is God who helps with that, but being born from above is also a consequence of the good choices that we make—choices that open things up, choices that present new possibilities, choices that can help us to grow in our faith and in our lives, so we give thanks today for the story of Nicodemus and for the message that we can grow if we make those choices to have new experiences in our lives and to stop those things which take us from God. We give thanks this day for God's transforming power. Amen.