

What God Gives Birth to in Us

1 John 5:1-5

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May 13, 2012

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God. . . . 1
Jn. 5:1

On Mother's Day we think of the woman who gave us birth and of all we owe her. Abraham Lincoln is reported to have said of his mother, who died when he was nine, "All that I am or ever hope to be I owe to her."¹ Many in this room, thinking about their own mothers, share the same sentiment.

Andrew Jackson's father died before he was born and his mother died when he was fourteen. Later in life he said, "The memory of my mother and her teachings were the only capital I had to start in life, and on that capital I have made my way."²

A noted churchman and missionary was nearly eighty years old when he wrote that he was still living on the strength of his mother's love.³

Such is the debt numbers of us feel, especially upon Mother's Day.

This, however, is not a Mother's Day sermon in the typical sense, for it puts the focus not on our earthly mothers but upon our Heavenly Mother. This morning we can turn our thoughts to the debt of gratitude we owe God who has given birth to so much in our lives.

Let us thank our Heavenly Mother for giving birth to our faith.

The author of 1 John speaks of coming to faith as a kind of birth. "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God" That is the apostolic word on the matter. It is a particularly Johannine expression, for it appears mostly – though not exclusively – in the New Testament books that bear the name John. Its most famous appearance, of course, is in the third chapter of the Gospel According to John, where Jesus speaks of the importance of being born again or born from above.

A set of notes Dr. Blackwood had on this theme begins by quoting someone who suspects that the topic of rebirth has had the most unfortunate history of all the themes in Christian theology.⁴ Given the meaning of the term, it is unfortunate that the phrase "born again Christian"

has come into popular use. It is a redundancy. It is like calling someone a "male boy" or a "female girl" or a "white Caucasian." It is like saying "it is 10:45 AM in the morning." To be a believer is to be born of God. Being born of God is not some kind of new happening that occurs after a person becomes a believer. It is not a quality or power added to our Christianity. It is our Christianity. "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God"

We should be swift to note that this birthing does not happen quickly. From time to time you mothers share stories about the number of hours you spent in labor. Those little bundles of joy who now bring you flowers and crayoned cards did not come quickly, and they did not grow up all at once. Eventually, in later years, it will seem as though the time flew by. But, at the time, it did not fly by at all. Birth, and then maturity, all happen over a length of time that takes its time.

It is the same with the birth of faith in us. It does not come all at once or emerge fully grown. Even the Apostle Paul's storied faith did not come from his Damascus Road experience alone. It was a work in progress. We can well imagine it was prepared for by his life as a Pharisee and as a persecutor of Christians. Following the Damascus Road experience he did not emerge as a Christian until Ananias met with him and taught him (Acts 9). Even at that, his strong faith carried alongside it a set of problems and perplexities, questions that remained unanswered. He was certain, but not wholly certain of everything.

As we look to our own faith at whatever stage it is now, large or small, growing or shrinking, confident or questioning, we can thank God for nurturing faith in us. This is the new birth.

Let us thank our Heavenly Mother for giving birth to love for the fellowship.

So much of the First Epistle of John is about love. Since Easter my pulpit work has been drawing upon this material, and has noted with some astonishment that there are only 104 verses in 1 John but some form of the word *love* appears 45 times. That is a high concentration.

The First Epistle of John has the idea that God gives birth to love. "We love," 1 John says, "because [God] first loved us." This love that comes from God is not only a love for God, it is also a love for our sisters and brothers in the household of God. Those who love the parent, says 1 John, love the child; those who love God love the children of God.

More than the topic of 1 John, this was the lived experience of the first Christians. One of the most prolific authors in the days of the early church

after the close of the biblical era was a man named Tertullian. In one of his influential pieces he quoted an opponent of Christianity who openly marveled at how much those first believers loved each other.⁵ This opponent may have thought the belief of the Christians laughable if not ghastly, but their profound love for each other impressed him.

Now, look. Love for the fellowship has not been left behind in the first centuries. It is part of our Christian experience, too. We do not love one another consistently or perfectly, of course; siblings never do. Members of the same church have trouble getting along now and then, and sometimes it is more now than then. But love – a love born of God – is here and alive.

Examples? That's easy! Let there be, say, a graduation of one of our youth from high school. Who is present under the tent at the party? Who is sitting around the tables in the garage? Church members! They are not there for the beer, barbecue, and baked beans. They are there to show loving support to the graduate and to the graduate's family.

Or let there be a death. Who springs into action? The church members with their ministries of salads, hot dishes, sympathies, and more.

There may be differences of opinion among us – differences political, spiritual, and social – but we are one family bound together in love by love. God has given birth to that, and we can be grateful.

Let us thank our Heavenly Father for giving birth to courage conquer the world.

Do you remember this line from the reading today? "[W]hatever is born of God conquers the world."

Do not doubt for an instant faith's ability to conquer the world. This is not something we have to look hard after in order to find. There are instances of it in our own congregation's history. In our own people, one after another, God has given birth to the courage to conquer the world.

My files contain the application essays our students have written toward the academic scholarships Salem offers. Nearly every one of those essays over nearly all the years credits the congregation with helping the graduate find the courage to pursue higher education. How many fears are there in leaving home for school far away? Through the church and otherwise God has given birth to the courage to face these fears.

Just the other day, we laid Richard Baumgartner to rest. Talk about the courage to overcome the world! Dick was a living example of it. He

battled diabetes, weathered a kidney transplant, fought off a torn esophagus, suffered a stroke, and walked on bad knees his poor health would not let him replace. Still, his effortless smile shone through undefeatable. That's the courage to conquer the world.

When Barry Robinson first thought about starting this chorus you have just heart, he was afraid. He feared rejection. He did not think the men would accept his idea of getting together for separate rehearsals and such. But he wanted to keep young men active in the church and give young boys role models to look up to. With God's help, he overcame his fear, and look at the result.

Every pew here has its story. These I've told are not alone. Every person in every pew knows something about what it is that knocks a person down and threatens to lay them low. Circumstances, disappointments, failures, self-doubts – the list is long and daunting and every pew has one. But all know, too, I trust, something of the truth behind the apostle's words:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed (2 Cor. 4:8-9)

We know the victory God gives birth to.

So today, as we think of the woman who gave us birth and of all we owe her, let us not forget our Heavenly Mother but let us give God heartfelt thanks for all God has given birth to in our lives, especially faith, the love of the fellowship, and the courage that conquers the world.

¹ William Lee Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), p. 63. Miller notes, however, Lincoln likely was referring more to the genes he received than to Nancy Hanks Lincoln's personal character.

² H. W. Brands, *Andrew Jackson: His Life and Times* ((New York: Doubleday, 2005), p. 32.

³ Lesslie Newbiggin, *Unfinished Agenda* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 3.

⁴ "John: The New Birth," Box 2, The Andrew Watterson Blackwood, Sr. Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), p. 373.