

## “What Does It Mean To Be Born Again?”

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5<sup>th</sup> Sunday Worship: Our Stories

First Congregational Church UCC of Burlington, Vermont

I was raised in a Fundamentalist Religious Tradition, starting out as Christian Missionary Alliance, then Wesleyan Methodist, then Baptist. Pretty conservative stuff. I was quote "born again" in high school at a Billy Graham crusade where I said the right words and I did mean them, fully immersed at baptism and I went to a conservative Christian college located in western NY in a small town known as "the little island of decency". You would not believe the rule book and behavior pledge we had to sign just to attend there.....no dancing; no movies; no mixed swimming; no sleeveless dresses and on and on.

Yet while there, I took a course called "The Life Of Christ" where the text book lined up the four gospels side by side so that we could compare the scriptures. It was here that I really began to think about and embrace the true message of Jesus. I believe I was "born again" into the true faith and not just the repetition of saying the right words. I am not sure thinking for myself is what they had in mind for me at that college but that is what happened to me.

I graduated, married and found a job on Long Island working with children and families in great need....those who were economically deprived, abused and oppressed in our culture. I continued to attend church, though now we chose one that was considered a progressive leaning Baptist congregation, more enlightened you might say. However, as I became more involved in my job, I came to see it as my calling, my ministry according to what I understood Christ's gospel had taught me in that course in college.

I saw nothing in my church that related to that same gospel....call it social gospel if you will. I started to feel dissatisfied and unfed at my church. We decided to take a break from church...a kind of Sabbatical. I never lost my deeply rooted faith during this time but was searching for a new more meaningful expression of faith. I read a book written by Scott Peck called "The Road Less Traveled" where he suggests when searching for faith, don't throw the baby out with the bath water"...hold on to what seems real and find a way to make it meaningful.

We stumbled on to the local UCC congregation. After a few short weeks of sermons and seeing what the active church mission was all about, it became clear, this was the church for me. I like to say that I have been "born again" into the UCC.

In the not to distant future, I went thru a very painful divorce. Without my deepened faith and supportive faith community, I do not know how I would have gotten through it all. However, I learned through faith and friends, how to recreate my life, how to grow even deeper through book and scripture studies, prayer and meaningful sermons. You might say I was "born again, again".

Ten years later, I married the most wonderful man many of you know as Rev. Bob Lee, the love of my life and my soul mate. We had the happiest 20 years together here at First Church where I, along with you, was privileged to continue to grow in faith and practice putting that faith to work in every day life. I continued my work and ministry in my job here in Middlebury, VT with a population similar to those I served on Long Island.

As you know, I lost Bob unexpectedly just after he retired. It has been unimaginable pain to live on without that vibrant, tender, faithful and very funny person in my life. So again, I am called upon to recreate my life and remain faithful to my God and my creator who is and has ever been present to me.

I was privileged to attend a Habitat for Humanity conference several years ago in another state. It was a beautiful day so I decided to take my box lunch outside to eat. I saw a young woman coming my way and immediately my red flag went up. Having spent so much time in the born again community, I can spot the facial expression right off. I was prepared. "Are you born again?", she asked. "Yes, many times", I answered. She looked at me like that answer was not in the script and then just walked away.

The truth be told, I have been "born again" many times and as I continue to grow in faith, I expect to continue that process until I am made completely new again in the next life.

Thanks be to God.

Donna A. Lee