

John 3:1-17

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This Trinity Sunday we turn to John's Gospel, "Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things

and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

This account of the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus is one that is familiar to many. It even includes that verse that many say is “the Gospel in a nutshell.” But what we lose when we take such familiarity for granted with this text is just how strange Jesus is during it. Nicodemus comes to him and confesses that he knows Jesus to be a teacher come from God. One would expect Jesus to engage with what Nicodemus has just said because that’s how conversation works. It is off-putting and strange to say to someone, “You did a really amazing job and I appreciate it.” And for them to respond with, “My cat’s favorite toy is purple.”

That certainly seems to be what Jesus is doing here.

Nicodemus didn't ask about the kingdom of God or his seeing it.

He is paying Jesus a compliment and Jesus blows past what

Nicodemus has said and launches into a completely different

conversation. Or so it seems. While it may appear that way on

the surface, Jesus is actually responding to Nicodemus' point.

How can Nicodemus know that Jesus has come from God if he

cannot even see the kingdom of God? He doesn't realize that he

isn't simply talking with a prophet or a teacher. He is speaking

to God in the flesh. He is speaking to the one who *is* the

kingdom of God. And he doesn't even know it.

But Jesus tells Nicodemus how to see the kingdom. And

not just see the kingdom; but how to enter into it. How to

become a part of this. And it happens through water and the

Spirit. Yes, the Spirit is important in this whole process.

For many of us Lutherans, it may seem as though the Holy Spirit is the silent partner in the Trinity. We speak a lot about Jesus, the Father certainly gets his due, but the Spirit is often mentioned only in passing. And the Spirit wouldn't have it any other way. If you recall from our Gospel reading last Sunday, Jesus explains what the Spirit does; "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me."

Indeed, we ought not to think that the Spirit is silent or does nothing. The Spirit points us to Christ. The Spirit continually draws the people of God back to the truth of the cross and the salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. The Spirit is the one who answers Nicodemus' question of how one is born again.

When Jesus says that we must be born again of water and the Spirit, he is speaking of what happens in baptism. We are born again, made into a new creation by the powerful working of the Spirit. The faith that the Spirit brings is the means by which we have salvation and enter into the kingdom of God.

The faith that we have received in Baptism is the faith that saves. And it is a faith that has Jesus Christ as the focus and object of this faith. We do not simply have faith in faith or faith as an intangible and ill-defined idea. We have faith in Jesus. Further, we are baptized in the name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This faith that we have been given isn't simply a faith that there was someone named Jesus at some point in time. It isn't a faith like Nicodemus begins confessing that Jesus is surely a teacher from God. No, it is a faith that recognizes all three persons in the Trinity and the indispensable role that each one

has in our creation, world, and salvation. One who rejects the Trinity rejects the faith of the true God.

Truly, in our world of consumeristic faith, it is not uncommon for people to create for themselves all kinds of varied and often self-contradictory ideas about God, faith, and Jesus. We want to be free to decide what we are convinced of and then go with what we think works. This accomplishes little more than creating little false Jesus' everywhere. The only difference is that they exist in our minds rather than on a street corner. But the problem is that there is one Jesus. There is one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. We who have been claimed by Christ are united around him.

We are united around him because he is the truth. He is the Word of God made flesh. It is the one Christ who the Spirit testifies concerning and it is the same one Jesus who suffered and died for us. There is only one Lord Jesus Christ who bled

for you. It is the same Jesus who was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried. As St. Peter said about this Jesus, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Indeed, dear friends, you have been saved. Through faith in this Jesus, there is salvation for us. There is forgiveness for us. Through faith, we come to see the truth of the Trinity, even if we cannot fully understand or quantify the Trinity. This faith that we have all been given and share in is described in the words of the Creeds. It is found all throughout our liturgy. This is the reason that we read the Athanasian Creed on this Sunday and other high feast days. It describes in great detail what this faith is that we believe. It isn't something open to personal interpretation and it doesn't lend itself to creating false messiahs in our own minds who tell us what we want to hear. It describes

the faith that Christians have bled for and suffered for for almost two thousand years. It describes what it means to actually be a Christian and not just someone who might mistakenly use the term.

You see, there is a unity to this faith. We who hold to the faith as expressed by the apostles and the Church through the centuries stand together. The Church is not a collection of individual people with their own similar but different gods. It is the people of Christ united together around his Word and Sacraments. This unity is expressed as we stand together to receive the Lord's body and blood. We believe these things together. It isn't just about me and Jesus, but it's about Jesus and his Church, of which we are a part. This is why we ask that those who do not share in the same doctrines, especially regarding the Lord's Supper, refrain from communing with us,

in addition to the danger of someone receiving this gift in an unworthy manner and the judgement that brings.

Yes, Christ has established his Church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it. The Spirit has called you into his Church and made you part of it. The Father created you and continues to care for you and provide for you what you need in this life. You have been made alive, born again through water and the Spirit. You have been given a place within the kingdom of God. And because we have this gift, this blessing, we rightly rejoice in it. We do not need to come to Jesus at night when no one will see us. We come here and we boldly raise our voices in praise to the Triune God who has created us, redeemed us, and gives us life both now and into eternity. Amen.

Now, may the peace that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord to life everlasting. Amen.

