

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: John 3:1-17

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

¹¹ "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

One day when St. Augustine was at his wits' end to understand and explain the Trinity, he went out for a walk. He kept turning over in his mind, "One God, but three Persons. Three Persons—not three Gods but one God. What does it mean? How can it be explained? How can my mind take it in?"

And so, he was torturing his mind and beating his brains out, when he saw a little boy on the beach. He approached him to see what he was doing. The child had dug a small hole in the sand. With his hands he was carrying water from the ocean and was dumping it in the little hole. St. Augustine asked, "What are you doing, my child?"

The child replied, "I want to put all of the water of the ocean into this hole."

St. Augustine asked, "But is it possible for all of the water of this great ocean to be contained in this little hole?"

And then it dawned on Augustine, "If the water of the ocean cannot be contained in this little hole, then how can the Infinite Trinitarian God be contained in your mind?"

I confess, I always feel it's a bit daunting to write sermons about the Trinity. God, Jesus and Holy Spirit are One, how can that be? It is not a concept that fits into our human understanding. Yet we know it must be important. The term "trinity" is not explicitly found in the Bible. However, the concept it represents does exist in Scripture. The word "trinity" describes the triune God—three coexistent, co-eternal Persons who are one God, not three Gods.

On this Trinity Sunday, the lectionary takes us to the story of Nicodemus to shed some insights for our understanding on the importance of the Trinity for our spiritual growth. Before

John gets to the story of Nicodemus, we find that he has introduced us already to the reality of the Trinity in the first chapter of his Gospel.

John 1:1-5 says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it." Then later in verse 14, he says: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." John used "the Word" to mean Jesus. And later at Jesus' baptism, we read that the "Spirit from heaven" descended on Jesus like a dove. The Spirit from heaven indicates God's presence.

With this introduction to the inter-workings of the Trinity, we move on to the story of Nicodemus. First, we need to take a brief look at the person, Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of a select group who made a pledge to spend their entire lives observing every detail of the law. Being a Pharisee meant that he was very knowledgeable about religious matters. He set himself apart from ordinary life. He was highly respected for his obedience to the Law.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, when it was dark, perhaps so that he would not be seen. He was a well-known man with an image to keep, and fearing the possibility that he might discover Jesus to be a bogus religious fanatic, he didn't want to be caught seen with him. The other possible reason is based on the belief of the rabbis that nighttime was the best time to study. Perhaps, knowing that Jesus was always surrounded by people, Nicodemus may have thought there would be less interruptions if he talked to Jesus at night.

The commentators point out that John uses the darkness in his gospel to represent the evil in the world; and then, of course, the light is Jesus, the truth for the world. I found myself thinking about the darkness in this instance, as an introduction to the mystery of God. Mystery, when likened to darkness, invites us into a journey of revelation, in this case, the revelation of the light, the truth of the world.

Nicodemus came to Jesus to learn more about who he was and to ask questions about his teachings. Interestingly, Nicodemus addresses Jesus as Rabbi, a teacher who has come from God. He feels, as well as others in his circle of friends, they know this because the many miracles Jesus performed could only be done by one sent by God. Nicodemus wasn't wrong, but he didn't understand the depth of Jesus' connection with God, and of course, Jesus knew this.

Jesus then, didn't make it exactly easy for Nicodemus. He presented Nicodemus with a riddle that went like this: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Perplexed, Nicodemus responds to what Jesus said in literal terms, trying to use worldly understanding; but Jesus continued to speak in spiritual terms, kingdom of God understanding. Nicodemus spoke of being "born again" in the flesh, but Jesus spoke of being born from above.

The mysteries of God elude us, perhaps even annoy or frustrate us, if we expect to understand them through the means of the flesh, which demands certainty and tangible answers. Ultimately, Jesus claims that the Spirit, the third party of the Trinity, moves us to interpret God in ways that go beyond certitude. Jesus tells us that we don't need to know everything without a doubt. The Spirit leads us to the opportunity to become a part of God's kingdom, where we can grow in our understanding of Godly matters, and at the same time be at ease with what we don't understand because we trust and know God. As members of God's kingdom, our vision, our

understanding of life goes beyond fleshly understandings. Even as we live in this earthly kingdom, we also belong in the spiritual realm of life.

So far, we can see Jesus putting together the pieces that make up the Trinity. Nicodemus seems to understand as much as is possible about who God is. He has a partial grasp on who Jesus is, at least he knows Jesus was given by God, although he may not know Jesus as God's Son. And know Jesus brought the Spirit into the picture. Their connectedness comes to earth from God's kingdom.

Nicodemus was left with a lot to think about, and hopefully he prayed for understanding. I suspect, he continued to seek whatever it was that Jesus had to share. We can assume that what was a mystery to him became clearer as he continued his journey. We find later in Nicodemus' life he went to Jesus' tomb bearing spices to assist Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus' body for burial which suggests that his insight increased over time.

Like Nicodemus, we know as much as we can comprehend about who God is, Creator, Ruler, Lover of all the earth. We understand more about Jesus than Nicodemus during this particular encounter. We know Jesus as the Son of God who came and lived in this world to teach and save the world; and we understand that the Holy Spirit is the Advocate who came to be among us after Jesus ascension, to help the community of faith continue Jesus' mission. The harder part to wrap our thoughts around is that all three are One, God is all three, there are not three Gods.

This is quite significant to our faith. The Trinity is not an abstract thought to be ignored. The Rev. Dr. Marshall Jolly explains why. She writes, "When we think about the Trinity abstractly, it is ever so easy to forget the central tenet of our faith is not just that we are created by God, but that God walks among us, most fully in the person of Jesus, and also in the face of the stranger and the oppressed and the marginalized, and God leads us to new depths of faithfulness in the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, this isn't something that *has* happened in history; no God is still, even at this very moment and in every moment, creating, walking among us and leading us."

Equally important is our recognition of the Trinity in the crucifixion.

God who became human flesh through Jesus, went to the cross with Jesus.

The Spirit was there too. Jesus died and arose from the grave. Then God made human flesh through Jesus is resurrected through His own action and the power of the Spirit. When we stop and think about the crucifixion and resurrection with the Trinity in mind, what happened to us that God's life and love are bigger even than the most monstrous and cruel consequences of human sinfulness. Hallelujah!

The questions we have about the Trinity may not ever be fully answered in this lifetime. But the Spirit, who comes to us when we believe in Jesus, sheds more light on the mystery for us, as we continue to seek Jesus. And even if we never understand totally, the Spirit will give us peace, raising us above the earthly demand we may feel to have to understand everything about God in order to know and believe in God.

We can think use the symbolism of a hat as we ponder this. I wear four hats, or more. I am mom. I am wife. I am Gram. I am Pastor. I am all of those things at the same time and can't stop being one when I am serving as the other. But underneath it all, I am Twyla. I am and I do all of those other things, but that doesn't change who I am at my core. The Trinity is much like that. God doesn't change who God is, but we can know God in different ways.

This God, bigger than anything we can imagine, has come and continues to come to us in a variety of ways to love on us, to save us, to make us a community bonded together through

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him, to call us to continue to help build His kingdom. We don't need to totally understand to have Him in our life, nor to do God's work. May each of us, strengthened, forgiven and cleansed, and nourished by God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in humility and boldness say, "I'm yours God, and even though I am still growing in my faith, I'm ready to do your will." Amen.