

Trinity Sunday
Calvary Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 6:1-8
John 3:1-17

This is the second time this year that we have turned our attention to this passage in John's gospel. During Lent, we paid particular attention to the verses about Jesus being lifted up on the cross. (Remember I talked a lot about the snakes in the desert?) Today, on Trinity Sunday, we go back and read it again, to notice the "pervasive Trinitarian pattern" in these words. Trinity is not a word you find **in** the scriptures. It's a theological concept that comes out of a serious study of **all** of scripture. Listen for the ways that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all a part of this conversation. I hope you will also notice how Jesus' teaching requires us to listen carefully; to hear more than his words, perhaps more than we are ready or willing to hear.

This passage contains what is surely the best known verse in all of the New Testament. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Martin Luther called this verse "the New Testament in miniature." It's just all you need to know.

The story begins with this man named Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night. Nicodemus has seen the **signs** that Jesus has done and wants to know more, but he can't quite wrap his mind around what Jesus is trying to say to him. He doesn't know what to believe. Let's listen, one more time, to their conversation. John 3:1-17

One More Time

Before we actually get to graduation time this month, it seems that everyone has to pass through the season of testing. Every young person I have talked to recently had stories about testing. The confirmation class talked about their upcoming SOLs. Even children from Mt Eagle who came with their parents to the English classes on Thursday night told me how anxious they were about the third grade version of those state tests. Bigger kids are worried about their exams. And the group of adults I spent yesterday with are dealing with the results of this season's ordination exams which were just published.

That was the one completely satisfactory thing about teaching high school—at the end of the chapter I could give a test and actually measure what things the teenagers heard and what things went out into the ether never to be recovered. Students always think the tests are designed to judge them, but most tests are really for teachers to figure out what things need more attention the next time around and what things I had failed to explain as well as I had hoped.

It's harder in the church. Every week I wonder if the people in this room hear what I hoped I was saying. I know that preaching is two way communication and no matter how careful I am about the construction of what I think I need to say, you all won't hear the same thing. Sometimes, I'm not clear. Sometimes I have been careless in my preparation and all the threads of my thinking don't come together very well. And sometimes the filter between your ears and your brain are engaged in ways I could never have anticipated. Sometimes people thank me for saying things I didn't know I was even thinking about. But, I don't get to pass out a pop quiz during the offertory to see how I did this morning. There is no exam at the end of the Easter season to see if there has been any growth in understanding or in discipleship. I just can't say, "I'm sorry, (friend) but your intermittent attendance and failure to grasp the main concepts force me to fail you in Easter this year."¹

This conversation that Jesus has with Nicodemus is completely unsatisfactory. They are not communicating at all. It's as if they are intentionally talking past each other. Did you notice that their conversation has no ending? It is forever unfinished. Nicodemus just disappears into the night, in the middle of the passage and Jesus goes on talking. He's not finished. There are some more things he needs us to hear, but Nicodemus is no longer listening.

The narrator tells us that Nicodemus is a Pharisee. The very word *Pharisee* is from the Hebrew word for one who "breaks down" Torah, who dissects the scripture word by word, searching for every possible meaning, lest they miss some slight nuance that God may have hidden within the very words. Pharisees counted the words and analyzed every splotch on the page. But when Jesus wants Nicodemus to hear two meanings of the Greek adverb *anōthen*, when he says "You must be born *anōthen*, Nicodemus refuses to go there. *Anōthen* has all the meanings in Greek that we find in various translations of the Bible. We read "from above" this morning, but other translators have chosen the more familiar words, "You must be born again." Others have tried "for a second time" or "in a new way." Each of those translation choices is inherently wrong, because the conversation hangs on the ambiguity in that word. Nicodemus insists that he can only hear the "again" meaning and launches into that absurd response about re-entering his mother's womb.

I can almost hear Jesus' discouragement. He is trying to have a serious exchange with a learned man, not with one of those fishermen he hangs out with, who need so much repetition and an explanation of everything. Here is a teacher of religion, a cultural leader of the people. He should be the one who could banter back and forth with Jesus and pick up every nuance of meaning that Jesus might possibly imply or subtly suggest. That's his specialty. That's what he does. So, Jesus tries to help him out by talking about the wind—another word game because *wind* and *spirit* are the same word in both Hebrew and in Greek—maybe if Nicodemus heard such an obvious example of a word with multiple meanings, it would prompt him to notice the other one. But of course, it doesn't. The Spirit is a very inconvenient concept for the Nicodemuses of the world, who suppose they have every idea neatly ordered and arranged, clearly labeled and sorted into neat piles. New information is hard for them to assimilate. When the Spirit moves, you never know where it comes from, and it goes where it will. It can be very

¹ Stolen shamelessly from Barbara Brown Taylor's address to the Cathedral Lecture Series, June 6, 2006.

confusing. The work of the Spirit is rarely done decently and in order in the way that Presbyterians are known to prefer things. It can be very unsettling, for Nicodemus and for us.

Jesus is trying to suggest to Nicodemus that there is change in the air. He has to take what he knows and look at it in a whole new way. That vision of God sitting on the throne far, far away with those six winged seraphim darting through the ether that Isaiah had described for him generations ago—and that we sang about this morning—with the saints arranged around him in neat rows casting down their golden crowns around a glassy sea separating the heavenly beings from humans. That concept is about to be enlarged. It's not wrong, just incomplete.

Nicodemus says that he has seen the signs, but he doesn't know what they mean. He can't imagine a change in his picture of God. He can't imagine that God is not already finished revealing everything there is to know about the one God of Israel. Nicodemus believes that if he studies hard enough on his own terms, he will be able to figure it all out for himself. Jesus final words to him are: "You are a teacher of Israel and you do not understand these things?"

Frankly, in spite of Jesus' obvious annoyance with Nicodemus, I have a great deal of sympathy for him. I, too, am a teacher, and I'd like to confess that there are some things I do not quite understand. I do not look forward to occasions when I am called to talk about the Trinity. It's not easy, and because it is a concept that comes from careful study of all scripture, and any good explanation requires a firm grasp of New Testament scripture. I had a very long afternoon trying to explain Trinity to a class of high school kids at a Jewish Temple out in Fairfax. The only text I knew to work with was the creation story at the beginning of Genesis where the Spirit of God moves over the waters of chaos, and by the Word, God speaks creation into existence. But that means you've got to accept that we use "the Word" to speak about the second person of the Trinity before the incarnation. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Got that? The Word is how we talk about Jesus, before there was Jesus, throughout the Old Testament story. I was in such deep trouble.

The Trinity is just not a product of abstract speculation, but a summary of how God is revealed in the New Testament. In the fourth century St Augustine offered the example of a flower. The Father/Creator is like the deep, life-giving root that is unseen in the earth; and the Son is like the green shoot that bursts forth into the light of the world unfolding the plant for all to see; and the Spirit is like the fragrance of the flower spreading its essence out into the world. It's all God, and without any of the three, it just isn't. Does that picture work for you?

Some of you may have read the latest attempt to explain the Trinity in the best-selling book by William Young called *The Shack*. It's been on the paperback best-seller list for almost two years now. He tries to explain the Trinity by describing a community of three people—a big African Mother figure who cooks and hugs and provides for the wounded man's comfort, a small Semitic man who is busy building things and helping him see the truth, and a wispy young Asian woman who keeps slipping mysteriously in and out of the story. As they sit around the table and eat together, the man is rescued from his despair. Jesus says, "Listen, I am standing at the door knocking, if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you" (Rev3:20). This wounded soul needs the ministry of all three to return to wholeness and find abundant life. It's not a great book. It would have benefited from a better editor as it seems to

teeter on the edge between the truly profound and the hokey, but it's a fresh attempt to explain the mystery of the one God of Israel who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is one of those things in life that I have learned “by heart,” rather than by careful investigation. The words of generations of theologians repeated constantly in our liturgy have allowed me to absorb concepts that I may never be able to adequately explain. We hear the trinity every time we baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We hear the trinity as every communion prayer is addressed to the Father, thanking the creator for the gift of Jesus, thanking Jesus for all he has done for us, and asking the Spirit to make the feast real for us. When we leave this sanctuary every Sunday morning to go back into the world, the good words, the bene-diction, is always in the Trinitarian form. Trinity is the basic building block of the Christian faith. Look for it when you read scripture. Listen for it in worship. Find all the names for Father, Son and Spirit in the bulletin each week and in every hymn we sing. Ask the children to count all the things they see and hear that are in threes. Sing out, “Holy, holy, holy, God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” Learn it by heart. It is the heart of the gospel. I mean to tell you that—over and over again.

When this gospel writer talks about the world, it usually refers to those who are at odds with what Jesus is preaching—those who, like Nicodemus, will not believe even when they see the signs. But it's that world—all the parts of it—all the people in it—all the Nicodemuses as well as the Peters and the Marthas that God loved so much. God loved this world so much that he sent his beloved child, a reflection of God's very self, into the world so that those who would open their eyes and their hearts might discover what life is all about—a theme that comes directly from the prologue to this gospel when the poet says, “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God...what came into being in him was life—and the life was the light of all people” (John 1:1, 4). Creator, Word, and Life. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God's steadfast love for us just keeps showing up—from the beginning of the story all the way to the end. Did I tell you that before?

Just in case you haven't heard me say it,
Or, if you didn't believe it when you heard it before, let me say it one more time:

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that everyone who believes in him shall never perish, but have eternal life.

That's the gospel.

Actually, I think there will be a test; one that will truly be a part of your permanent record. I hope that I'm doing my part well enough for you to remember what mattered,
So you will finish well above average.
And be ready when you graduate.