

**Year B, Trinity Sunday**

**May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

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**John 3:1-17**

### **To Be Able to Love from Above**

Nicodemus longs for something that has eluded him his entire life, a sense of wholeness, completion and all being well. Even though his peers are skeptical, Nicodemus thinks there is something special happening with Jesus that may help him. He wants to know more but aware of the rivalry and envy that swirls within his group, he comes at night. No use giving his enemies fodder to fuel their campaign to push him aside.

Being a Pharisee, Nicodemus earnestly wants to bring true religion and faithful piety back to the people. The Pharisees strongly believe the religious establishment in Jerusalem is corrupt, illegitimate and the reason God is not blessing them. In our modern idiom, they are the leaders of the populists.

Nicodemus very respectfully approaches Jesus. Already he exhibits a rare wisdom. “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

Jesus knows that Nicodemus is open and teachable because he called him “Rabbi.” Pushing aside conversational preliminaries, Jesus addresses the heart of Nicodemus’ dilemma. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Nicodemus has organized his life around being good and keeping all the rules so as to feel safe and connected to God but it hasn’t worked. Now Jesus says if he wants that he must be born from above. What did he mean? How do you do that? “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” Jesus seems to be saying you can have a new life but it must come from beyond yourself.

Jesus then says, “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water, (step number one) and Spirit (step number two).” To be born of water means to accept yourself as flesh and blood, born into human community the way all humans are and to know that you are

no different than other humans. We are all born of water. Accept that and give up the quest to be extraordinary, better than your neighbor, and exceptional so as to prove your worth and quell your emptiness.

Remember, the Pharisees believed that when every Jew lived the Godly life like they did, then the kingdom would come. They didn't accept that they were as subject to rivalry and violence as everyone else. They thought the coming of God's kingdom depended on everyone being as pure as they thought they were.

The reference to being born of water is not a coded reference to baptism. It is about accepting our humanness; a humanness that includes constant rivalry and the violence that goes with that. If Nicodemus wants to enter the Kingdom of God, that place where there is no rivalry, he must give up his quest to be better than his neighbor. Accepting that he is a sinner (in rivalry) like everyone else is step number one and must happen before step number two is possible.

Jesus says, "What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit." There is a separation and you can't move from the flesh to the Spirit on your own. Paul Neuchterlein says the term "flesh" is simply rivalrous mimetic desire. It's that restlessness for more that says "I want it because they want it. It must be valuable because they want it. When I have it too, I will be complete and my restlessness will go away."

We must model ourselves after someone not caught in rivalry to escape it and that can only come from above, since all humans born of water are caught in rivalry—that might even be the deeper meaning of original sin.

Nicodemus must have been astonished. He had spent his life anxiously trying to rise above his own humanness and now Jesus tells him to accept himself as human so that he can be born from above.

This "being born from above" happens as we accept ourselves as God's beloved recipients of his forgiving grace. God knows we are mimetic. It's part of our humanity, a component of being born of water. But when we accept that and cease to fight it, trusting ourselves to God's

grace we find ourselves changing. The changing-power appears invisible like the wind but we see the undeniable result. “So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

I think we can even understand how this works. We each are formed by imitating others—other persons, other ideas, other cultural value—but we forget who we imitate and think it’s all coming from within us; that we are self-made.

When I was a child I would share an idea. My dad made no commit. Three weeks later he would announce the exact same idea only it was coming from him. He had forgotten it had come from me. I suspect I have done the same thing.

As we fall under the influence of Jesus’ Spirit from above, some of those old connections and attachments to specific but forgotten others, begin to unravel. Our imitation that binds us to their thoughts, feelings and actions loosens, and we find ourselves less caught that we had been. Consequently, we find ourselves thinking things we had never thought before, feeling things we have never felt before and doing things that before we could not have dreamed of. Since we have forgotten where the debilitating cords that bind us came from, this unraveling happens in secret. It’s like the wind we can’t see but we see the changes the wind produces.

Can you see how this is not some mystical thing happening magically but a fully explainable, psychological and social phenomena? If we begin with an accurate anthropology, an insightful understanding and acceptance of our humanity and a new understanding of the way God acts to rescue us in the world, we have the basis for a new psychology, sociology and theology. It’s all there and has been there all along.

Nicodemus, deeply attune to his culture’s unfulfilled longings, exclaims, “How can these things be?” How can this all be true and we have not seen it before? “Jesus answered; ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’” These are basic truths. This is how we human are put together. These are things you need to know if you are to lead.

Why are we so resistant to seeing the truth? Jesus speaks to this when he says, “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.” The non-rivalrous Trinity of Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit looks at the world

and sees what we have done to each other in our rivalry. They, the Trinity, know about the lynching in the south and throughout our country, about ethnic cleansing of indigenous people and about the deplorable ways we have treated women. They testify to what they have seen, the very thing we prefer to keep hidden, and so we don't believe them.

Remember the Holy Spirit, third party to the Trinity, is the defense attorney come from God who advocates for all those the world casts out. The Advocate knows what is going on beneath the surface and works to reveal the truth we want to hide. It will take the Son of Man lifted up on a cross to expose the truth and keep it from being hidden again. Our believing in him opens our eyes to what is going on in the world and our forgiveness by God's grace enables us to be born from above. If we can't accept that we build our unity through exclusion like all human's born of water, we will not be able to be born from above for we won't see the need.

When God sent Jesus to this earth, he wanted the whole world to see what we don't like seeing about ourselves. It's only when we see what we don't want to see that we experience the full power of his forgiveness. Believing what Jesus revealed about humanity and God's provision for it through the cross and resurrection points toward God's infinite and astounding compassion. It's a compassion that converts our hearts and moves us toward being able to love from above. **Amen.**