

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose
May 31, 2015
Trinity Sunday
John 3:1-17

Dear friends in Christ, Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is Trinity Sunday. Anyone in here remember learning about the trinity in Sunday School or Confirmation class? How many of you think that you completely and fully, totally with 100% of your being understand the trinity?

On Trinity Sunday, I feel like poor Nicodemus. He's got questions. So do I. Nick comes at night – he is literally “in the dark” – to get some answers for himself and his colleagues, the Pharisees, who find Jesus and his teachings confounding. And don't we, too, find the whole idea of “God in three persons, blessed Trinity” a little crazy and hard to explain? The Trinity is one of the core, defining teachings of Christianity. It dates back to the Council of Nicea of 325 AD, out of which the Nicene Creed came. So we've had plenty of time to think about how the Trinity works and come up with ways to explain it to one another. But the One-in-Three and Three-in-One still seems to slip through our fingers like sand.

Remember that old Abbott and Costello routine, “Who's on First?” Here's a similar bit written by a pastor on the subject of the Trinity. You'll have to bear with me on my voices here.

A: When you come to church you need to know the key players . . . you know, the ones who are worthy of honor and praise.

B: Honor and praise, huh? Well, who are they?

A: O.K., now listen closely. There is one God.

B: One God. That seems easy enough. What do you call this one God?

A: This one God is called, "God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit."

B: Now wait just a minute. You told me that there is only one God.

A: That's right!

B: So which is it?

A: So which is what?

B: Which name do you use for this one God?

A: The name I gave you.

B: But you gave me three names.

A: That's right.

B: What's right?

A: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

B: So there are three Gods?

A: No, one God.

B: So which is it?

A: Which is what? B: Father, Son or Holy Spirit?

A: Yes!

B: Yes to what?

A: That's God's name.

B: Which God?

A: Our one God.

B: Why did you give three names?

A: Because they aren't the same.

B: But you just told me there is one God. So which is it?

A: Which is what?

B: Which name is the name of your God?

A: I told you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

B: But that is three.

A: Yes, but it's only one.

So...does that help?!?

OK, if that doesn't help, then try this: Presbyterian preacher Frederick Buechner puts it this way: "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery. In a way, the Trinity is saying something about us and the way we experience God."

How's your understanding now?

If you're puzzled, you're in good company. I promise that I tried to pay good attention in seminary when we talked about the trinity. I really did. But the thing is, I think that the Trinity is sort of like Science, or Music, or History, or any subject, really. The more you know, the more you know how much you really DON'T know. Know what I mean?

The simple fact is that our God, full of love, who created us and loves us so much that he gave us his son, is so much more complicated and marvelous than we can understand or wrap our minds around.

Because of the scientific age that we live in, we don't do well, though, with mystery. We want to solve it. We want to figure it out. And oh boy, do we try to explain it all. You have heard it all before. God is like water: the same substance can be experienced as a liquid, a solid or a gas. Or an Egg – shell, yolk, white. Or God is like me: I can be experienced as a pastor, a mother, or a wife. There are dozens of these attempts to make the Trinity easier to understand (most of which appear during the Kids Sermon on Trinity Sunday). The truth is: none of them do justice to the deep mystery of God's eternal nature.

I imagine that Nicodemus was a man in his mid fifties or mid sixties, gray haired, physically distinguished, accomplished, successful in his work. He was a teacher of the law, a professor of religion at the temple in Jerusalem. He was one of the primary teachers of the law. Now, according to the story in the Bible, he is "older in life;" that is, an older man. That means he probably had about twelve children, all gone from home. He probably had fifty grandchildren plus ten great grand children. He probably heard that the eleventh great grand child was to be born and he thinks to himself, "Another great grandchild? I can't keep track of all their names." Nicodemus was a man who had pretty much seen it all.

So Jesus of Nazareth showed up in town, and Nicodemus had gone to hear Jesus preach in the temple. Nicodemus was touched by Jesus' preaching and decided to talk to Jesus.

So quietly, one night, Nicodemus quietly went over to the home of Jesus about midnight, not wanting his fellow religious professors to know. About midnight, Nicodemus came to Jesus' house and knocked on the door.

He goes to Jesus under the cover of darkness, creeping carefully and quietly...he wants to see, wants to understand. But he is a little nervous and doesn't want to be seen. This leader, a man of power, wants to see without being seen...and he comes to Jesus – who John has just told us “knows what is in everyone.”

“Teacher, I’ve heard about your signs!” Nicodemus says. *I want to see, I want to understand.*

In the face of his curious excitement, Jesus peers through the darkness at him and says – rather calmly, I imagine – “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

Or in other words, Jesus says to him, “Don’t you understand?”

Can you sense the embarrassment? The fear? The uncertainty that he must have felt?

In many ways, we are also no different than Nicodemus. We are not very comfortable with our questions, with our doubts about who God is, or with our knowledge. We don’t talk about it often because we don’t like to admit it. We shy away from attending that Bible study because we feel like we forgot everything we learned in Confirmation. *Gasp* What if the Pastor sees that I can’t turn to the book of Matthew very fast? What if the Pastor sees that I don’t really remember any of this stuff? We feel like Nicodemus when one of our kids asks us a question about our faith that we just don’t know how to answer. We feel like Nicodemus when someone we love has a terrible cancer diagnosis and we just don’t know if we can believe in God anymore. We feel like Nicodemus as we look for hope amidst uncertainty or fear.

And we can’t help ourselves – we hear a tight disappointment in Jesus’ voice as he asks this question: “Don’t you understand?” We’ve let the teacher down. And, so, with this disappointment in ourselves, we stand alongside Nicodemus. Alongside Nicodemus, who is, at the end of this exchange, silent in the darkness. And we listen to Jesus, thinking all the while, Yes, Jesus. You’re right. I don’t understand. I don’t get it. There’s so much that I don’t understand.

Jesus, in this darkness, becomes center. And he pushes through our disappointment. He breaks through the darkness. He speaks of the wind. “It blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it...but you do not know where it comes from. You do not know where it goes. So it is with *everyone* who is born of the Spirit.”

Jesus speaks of the wind...and of the water. That deep, dark water where God meets us in the gift of baptism, where God breathes new life into us through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus speaks of these things with clarity and intensity, and then he recognizes that they are mysteries to us. God has entered the world, has met us in darkness, and this incarnation – it is the beautiful manifestation of God’s deepest *mystery*: God’s unchanging love.

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.

‘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.

Nicodemus was a member of the ruling council, a teacher, a man of God, drawn out in the dark of night by a nagging wonder of hope in the midst of fear, hiding from the others in the ruling council to seek something new, to perhaps grasp the wonder. He was drawn by the miracles, but what he found was salvation, the real miracle of God. He was drawn out of the chaos and into the light, to live as a beacon of light in a world that to this day likes the fear of darkness to the glory and wonder of light. We too are drawn out of our chaos and into the light of Christ, out of the darkness of fear and into the light of faith. As we move with Nick from the night to the light where we find the love of Christ has surrounded us all along, it is just that in the darkness we couldn’t see it.

We don’t hear much of Nicodemus after this story. We don’t know if Jesus and Nicodemus met again in daylight. Nicodemus is quoted in a debate with the Pharisees who wanted to arrest Jesus: *Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?”* All we know is that after Jesus was lifted up on the cross and died, Nicodemus was there again on that day darker than any night, to lift him down from the cross, and prepare his body to be laid in the tomb. Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, to be a companion, friend, and savior. And we hear this story, and all of the others, and know we are beloved, and that though we go through darkness and death, that leads to life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.