

Trinity UMC May 30, 2021 Trinity Sunday
Rev. Geri Hamlen

There are wonderful scriptures that point to the idea of the Trinity but they are pretty abstract—philosophical even. I've chosen instead, for today, the story of Nicodemus...a learned man. A religious person. A political figure at the time of Jesus. Nicodemus lived like someone who had it all figured out. He knew who he was and where he fit in the world, in the Temple, in the hierarchy of power for his time in place. But, as you listen to his story, notice that he was a person for whom something was missing. Something was incomplete and just not quite right. He was looking for something more and he went out in the dark of night, hoping that Jesus would give it to him. Hear the words of God:

Scripture John 3: 1 – 12

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

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 apart from the presence of God.”

Jesus answered him,

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God
without being born anew.”^[b]

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?”

Jesus answered,

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God
without being born of water and Spirit.

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.^[c]

Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You^[d] must be born from above.’^[e]

The wind^[f] 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.”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

Jesus answered him,

“Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen;
yet you^[g] do not receive our testimony.

If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe,
how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

Sermon ‘Mystery of Trinity’

What is it that drives people to go out in the middle of the night?
What are they looking for? Hoping to find?

Maybe it’s as simple as grabbing a pizza for a midnight snack.
Or shopping at Walmart when it’s not so busy.

Maybe a person who works 3rd shift on a day off, or should I say night off...and they don’t want to mess up their sleep habits.

I remember a time in my life...in my 20's. I was living in an efficiency apartment in Des Moines on a busy retail street. It was an old brick building called the Bryn Mawr with beautiful wood-work and a Murphy bed in the wall that was hidden during the day behind what looked like closet doors. I pulled it down each night and flipped it back up in the morning, close the door and you'd never know there was a bed in the closet.

The building had a single washer and dryer in the basement but they could only be used during certain hours so I got in the habit of going to a laundromat over a few blocks in the college campus district. It was an All night laundromat and busy during the day. I figured out pretty quickly that the best time to go to the laundromat was after 10:00 at night. So when I had a restless night...couldn't sleep for whatever reason, I went out late at night to do laundry. I remember at the time feeling so daring and brave. Like a real grown up who could come and go as I please. Even in the middle of the night.

Looking back, doing laundry in the middle of the night, going grocery shopping and picking up a pizza all seems pretty mundane...Earthly, physical matters.

That's not what Nicodemus was up to. He had something else going on altogether. He was a settled, secure man. He had been to all the best schools and graduated with honors. His designation as a Pharisee earned him respect for being faithful to God's laws. He was a leader in the community and Jewish leaders were in a position of dignity and authority as they juggled the needs of the Jewish population with the mandates of the Roman Empire.¹

Yes, Nicodemus had something going on that drove him out into the night, looking for Jesus. A yearning, a spiritual itch. All of his earthly needs were taken care of but there was something in his heart, in his mind that was incomplete.

The Scripture implies that he and his buddies at the Temple had heard news of Jesus. Maybe even seen him. Nicodemus says: *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.*

I picture Jesus that night, sitting outside, after dark, under a starry, starry sky. Maybe a full moon like we're seeing here last night. I imagine him communing with God, soaking up some peace and quiet after a long full day of teaching and preaching. His earthly needs were taken care of and he was at peace spiritually...in unity with God and the Spirit.

Then along comes Nicodemus. Out after dark. Making statements that prompt Jesus to tell him a truth, a new idea that Nicodemus has never considered before.

Jesus answered him,

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew.”^[b] Born again. Re-born.

This was a new idea for Nicodemus and new ideas can be tricky. Because they don't fit in with the old and routine and mundane ideas that we have floating around in our heads. Nicodemus didn't get it so he asked:

*“How can anyone be born after having grown old?
Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?”*

Yes, Nicodemus is stuck in the worldly, bodily, earthly perspective...

He came out into the dark of night looking for something more but still, he can't help himself, he is focused on physical stuff, the mundane, going to the laundromat kind of thinking. And Jesus is patient with him...explaining:

*Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God
without being born of water and Spirit.*

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

At this point, Jesus, if he were a seminary professor or a professional theologian or even the Apostle Paul, could have gone into a big long dissertation about the Trinity.

The Father is in Unity with the Son who Lives in and through the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit works in the unity of God in Jesus.

But that wasn't the way of Jesus. No. Jesus meets us where we are and he knew that Nicodemus was confused. Jesus says:

Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You^[d] must be born anew, from above.'^[e]

*The wind^[f] 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."

Jesus is saying, relax. Go with the flow. Let the Spirit guide you like the wind. Trust that the Holy Power of God working through the Spirit, in the name of Jesus, can and will open you up to new understandings. To a wider and more loving way of life and living. And in order for that to happen...yes, you have to let go of the earthly things that give you so much comfort and security. In order to be born anew, you have to let go and die to that which prevents you from seeing the Kingdom of God, here and now.

How's that for a new idea, Nicodemus? A new concept for living? An openness to the bigger and broader and more beautiful life that God wants for all of us.

But Nicodemus was kind of stuck. He doesn't get it. He says...'How can these things be?' He's still thinking about the earthly, fleshly, physical stuff of the world. The laws and the rules. The bank accounts and the mortgage. The stuff stored up for a rainy day and the goodies waiting for him when he got home. The reputation and the safety of all that he has accomplished in this earthly realm.

And Jesus gets a little testy. He can tell that Nicodemus is yearning for something more but NOT willing to crack open the protective barriers that are locking him into an unsatisfactory existence. Nicodemus isn't yet willing or able to open himself to this new idea that Jesus offers. Jesus says, '*How is it you, a teacher of Israel, don't understand these things? If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?*'

We mustn't be too hard on Nicodemus. We too have trouble grafting new ideas onto our brains. In our life-times, we thought we had stuff pretty well figured out and then came the Pandemic and Racial Injustice issues a la 2020. We thought we lived in a country where there was a general consensus about what truth, justice, liberty really mean. Then came fake news, Russian hackers and bots feeding lies into our on-line media. Politics has turned ugly and conspiracy theories abound. All of this, my friends, is the earthly stuff that keeps **us** stuck and worried and confused while the heavenly things...the things that Jesus came to tell us have a way of getting lost in the shuffle.

Did you know....The doctrine of the Trinity itself has a quite the history of conflict and controversy. There was a time back in the 3rd and 4th centuries when the Mystery of Trinity was a new idea for those who called themselves followers of Jesus. Councils were called. Bishops gathered. Academics weighed in and there was a lot of name-calling and even demonstrations in the streets about how to describe the essence, the power and the relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

It didn't help that the word 'Trinity' can't be found in the Bible anywhere. No...Jesus didn't use the word Trinity. Paul didn't use the word Trinity. But the best thinkers, the most faithful and devoted leaders of that earliest church (so early that there wasn't even a pope yet) identified that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were named as a formulae of sorts that Jesus used to tell us what to do. Matthew 28...Go and Baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

They remembered the way that the number 3 keeps showing up in the Scriptures...3 visitors to Abraham, the 3 who were thrown in the lion's den. Jesus plus the 2 criminals, all 3 of them on the killing fields, crucified, died and buried.

In addition, they paid attention to that first Pentecost that we talked about last week, when the tongues of flames touched each person and the sound of thunder announced the coming of the Advocate, the Spirit that Jesus promised us. And they put into words an understanding about how God in 3 persons, blessed Trinity was revealed to them.

And then they argued and argued and argued some more. The Roman emperors got involved and people were thrown in prison and condemned to death for holding firm to what were called heresies, anathema. This went on and on and on until finally the Apostle's Creed emerged. Finally, the Council of Nicea approved the Nicene Creed. The hub-bub died down and over a long period of time, it appeared that things were settled. Phew...a new idea and heavenly idea was grafted on to the minds of the faithful who use, even now, the creeds to express the faith that we do our best to live out.

There are still out-liers who have their own way of looking at things: The Unitarians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Scientists but at least we're not arguing with each other or going to war over it.

The mystery of the Trinity is not a puzzle to be solved. It's a dance to be lived.ⁱⁱ Our minds couldn't possibly grasp the mind and heart and movement of God but there's an instinct at work in each of us. A desire to know more, like Nicodemus felt, about the heavenly things that Jesus talked about. Our challenge is to open our hearts and our minds and our souls to see and hear and live that glorious reality. And to use Trinity as a measuring stick for all of the earthly stuff that can really drag us down. Blame and name calling and discrimination and threats and power grabbing are the earthly things. When you hear them happening, stop and ask God to show you the heavenly things because that's what we really need.

The Trinity shows us...through the working of the Father, Son and Holy spirit, how it is possible to be transformed, reborn, opened to Jesus. To the Holy Spirit of courage and wisdom and love and concern for others. Trinity shows us how to let go of earthly concerns and open ourselves to the Grace and forgiveness that signal to us that heavenly powers are at work.

Nicodemus, quite possibly, did finally get the bigger picture. He, with Joseph of Arimathea, helped to prepare the body of Jesus for burial after his crucifixion. There's speculation that the disciples would have let him know about the resurrection 3 days later.

And what about you? I hope you all take some time to look for those heavenly things that Jesus is talking about. There is a way to open yourself to them and, like Nicodemus, be born anew.

Me? Well, I don't go to all night laundromats anymore. Most places I have lived since Des Moines don't even have a 24 hour laundry place. But I do find myself going out after dark sometimes. Use to be to walk my dog but even now, I go out to look for the stars in the sky and to feel the love of God. To sense the unity of Jesus in communion with God the Father while the Holy Spirit moves, like the wind, where it chooses...filling the empty spaces, answering the unasked questions and enlightening the darkness with the love of God. May you seek that same heavenly guidance. Come Holy Spirit...you are welcome here. Amen.

ⁱ White Awake: An Honest Look at What it means to be White, Daniel Hill pp. 93 – 98 IVP Books, Downer's Grove, IL.

ⁱⁱ The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation, Richard Rohr with Mike Morrell, Whitaker House, Kensington, PA, 2016.