

An Education on the Holy Trinity
John 3:1-17
The Festival of the Holy Trinity
May 30, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, Jesus teaches Nicodemus of the working of the Triune God, an education summarized well with these words: *Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The Festival of the Holy Trinity is a day that launches us into the six non-festival months ahead, grounding us in our identity as believers in the one true God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who alone is the “I AM” and all other gods, being false, are the great “I AM **NOTs**.” And because the Lord says, “I am God, and there is no other,” then we ought use this truth not only to meditate upon the question of who is our God (1st commandment), but also then on what it means to depend upon (2nd and 3rd commandments) and be subject to (4th commandment) and daily cared for by Him (5th – 10th commandments).

But, if we believe that meditating upon the identity of the Holy Trinity is the stuff of wise and learned men, we – ironically – have belittled and mocked our God. The wise and learned have no greater ability to comprehend the mysteries of God than do the little children, for – if God could be comprehended by the wise and

learned – then God is less than the wise and learned, inferior to the wise and learned, subject to the wise and learned.

But, as Nicodemus learns quickly, being wise and learned is no match for the mysteries of God... which may seem foolish and incomprehensible to men, but are glorious and holy and heavenly. And those very adjectives – glorious, holy, heavenly – cannot be said of anything natural to fallen man; thus, why should we expect fallen man can naturally discern the things of God?

Thus, poor Nicodemus – how he’s taken the brunt of criticism over the centuries! – trying to rationalize the things of God... and, yet, we should be sympathetic toward Nicodemus – not because Jesus is too hard on him, but because *we* are... we look down upon him for his rationalistic questions, when he is only doing what natural man understandably does – he’s trying to figure out the things of God with the assumption those things of God can be known by the wise and learned and ever-increasing knowledge of Man.

But our towers of Babel, no matter how individual and privately held in our own minds and hearts, our towers of Babel are never completed, always missing building blocks, always short of the goal... because even the wisest of men looks rather silly when trying to rationalize the mercies of God in reconciling man unto Himself.

So, let’s at least understand where Nicodemus is coming from... and, let’s meditate upon those divine words of Jesus and that far greater divine reality that he’s ‘coming from,’... and then, though

their conversation seem to be talking past one another, we will see that Jesus perfectly and gloriously teaches the most simple among us how our entire lives are defined by the Triune God.

Nicodemus begins by saying, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” This is quite the opening salvo, because – by it – Nicodemus is rationalizing that one can find God by looking at the natural world out there, seeing what goes *beyond* the natural course of events (namely, “signs”) and reasoning, “Ah! That must be from God!” Is that any different than what man always does: always thinking he can find God based on comparing the current course of things to the normal course of things. And, if it’s abnormal, suddenly we’re all going to get quite spiritual!

But, ironically, that implies that that which is natural or normal is not from God... that if the topic is science, sociology, math, history, God has no part in the conversation... that *creation* does not come from God. But, as the Scriptures tell us, *creation* has *divine* origins... that which is natural *according to* creation has divine origins. But, what Nicodemus has mistakenly left out (what you and I mistakenly leave out) is that the natural world we’re looking at is now tainted by the Fall. And, not only can fallen Man not separate natural from spiritual according to the Fall, he also now cannot even any longer find God according to creation. Man’s sin has so separated himself and this creation from a natural, perfect, holy,

divine relationship with God that God cannot be found by natural means. Yes, “the heavens declare the glory of God and the skies his handiwork,” and yes the masterpiece of the mountains and the orchestra of ocean waves all sing of the glory of the Creator... but who that Creator is cannot be known by even the wisest of natural men, for natural man is now fallen, corrupt, separated from the things of God.

This great truth is often overlooked and forgotten: Natural man assumes that – because the divine God created all of nature – man should be able to naturally find the divine God. But, natural man, born into what he considers the “natural” state of the Fall, forgets that the Fall and the resulting depth of sin is terribly “unnatural” to God’s kingdom, so that God himself must say to fallen, natural man, “unless one is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of heaven.”

And that’s exactly how Jesus responds to Nicodemus: “Truly, truly, I say to you...” (and that’s always a phrase of divine authority – the authority of the Holy Word who is God in the flesh)... “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

This is a fascinating response, because it is not an appeal to the atonement (cross-event), but it’s an appeal to justification being applied to the individual. Truly, it’s an appeal to *sanctification* – being made holy – being given access to the things of God. It is sanctification that unveils to us the New Creation and man’s reunited

relationship with God. Justification declares it is so... sanctification is the process by which it is manifested... not the improvement of the Old, but the being born anew – a being given a birth from God, from above... justification applied in ... and with that newborn Christian, a lifelong putting off of the Old... the scales fall from the eyes and Old Adam falls from New Adam, and – one day – the perfect holy, glorious, divine unity will be known and experienced by sight.

And it all **begins** with being born from above... being born into the kingdom of God. That's baptismal language. The adopted of God. *Those* are they who can see the kingdom of God... even as St John says in his epistle, "Beloved we are God's children now. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him." Notice the lack of recognition. The world, the natural man, cannot see the kingdom of God or properly recognize the family of His grace.

Already, Jesus is talking well beyond Nicodemus' human reason... and it's on display in Nicodemus' next question: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and born?"

Now, every now and then in Bible study or in conversation with the pastor, Christians will sheepishly disarm expectations about supposed wisdom by prefacing their question with something like, "This is a stupid question, but..." And then they proceed to ask a perfectly normal, legitimate, good, honest question. Of such they ought not be ashamed. Nicodemus' question, on the other hand...

now, *this* is a dumb question: “Can a man enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” But, the absurdity of the question is perhaps even intended by Nicodemus to show how outside of human reason Jesus’ divine words extend. Whether Nicodemus asks the question sarcastically or sincerely, Jesus’ answer again shows that the divine things of God cannot be comprehended even by the highest heights of human reason:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Not only can natural man not *see* God’s kingdom; natural man cannot *enter* God’s kingdom. God’s kingdom is not for *natural* man; God’s kingdom is for *newborn* man... John says, “He gave them the right to become children of God, born not of the will of man nor of flesh, but of God.”

Of course, the deniers of Baptism – who believe natural man may accept the things of Jesus into their heart on their own wisdom and accord - carry on the Rationalism of Nicodemus by saying that Jesus means to say, “unless one is born of water (by natural birth) and – secondly – by the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” But, you see in this rationalism that the mind of natural man is willing to go to rational absurdity in order to try and refute the divine gifts of God. For, how can you command one who is already born naturally to be born naturally: “unless one is born of water (by

natural birth).”? That is already true of all mankind; why even bring it up?

No, sanctification – the process of being raised up in the family of the holy God – is no natural, man-made process. It is the work of the “gift of the Holy Spirit.” Not only do we need God for the creation, but we also need him for the new creation. Our entire eternity depends upon God carrying man along in ways that man cannot naturally understand, but by which man divinely benefits. Jesus rhetorically jabs Nicodemus in a manner that certainly also humbles our desire to delve into the inner workings of God: “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?... If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

Now, is Jesus hereby saying that baptism is an earthly thing? Only in the sense that baptism and its spiritual new birth happens on earth through earthly means. But, to *explain* the power of baptism is something that goes beyond man: that heavenly thing the inner workings of which we cannot understand, but the divine promise of which benefits us forever. Someone can ask, “How can water do such great things?” And we can respond, “Certainly, not just the water, but the Word of God in and with the water.” And they can ask again, “Yes, but how do the water and the Word work together to actually make this little infant a child of God?” And, we can – as Jesus says of us – openly admit, “I do not know, but the Lord promises it to

be so. Trust His Word, His promises; and even through earthly means, He gives life.”

Thus, Baptism is a window into all of our relation with the Holy Trinity. We cannot understand Him; we cannot wrap our minds around him; we can only humbly kneel before Him and say, “Our help – all of it and every last bit of it – is in the name of the Lord.” That Lord who made the heavens and the earth, and who will make the new heavens and the new earth. And, in that (you can see), we now confess the one true God who created me, and that same one true God as he sanctifies me by His work in Word and Sacrament (**Holy Word, Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, Holy Supper**) unto life everlasting.

But, we’re missing a big piece of the puzzle, aren’t we? Didn’t I in my sin separate myself from this God who created me? Didn’t I, with you, and Adam before us, destroy and sever this relationship with God? How do I now have the promise that He will sanctify me – “holi-fy” me and keep me united with him – unto life everlasting if I made such a mess of the natural life that He gave me?

Jesus implicitly answers that by reminding Nicodemus that the holy things of God can only be known, can only be seen and entered into, through the righteous sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It *all* rests with him:

“No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” This is a fascinating response because

– at first glance – it seems to be incorrect. Did not Enoch walk with God, and was Elijah not taken up into heaven? And what of the souls of the faithful who died in Christ? – Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David?

We must understand that to “ascend” implies to go to the Father in **pure incarnate holiness**. Enoch was a sinner, as was Elijah. And, regarding Abraham, Joseph, and all who have died in the faith... their *souls* may be with Christ, but their bodies still await the resurrection. **Only Jesus** ascends in the righteousness of his own flesh and blood. Only **He** is righteous to bring unity between God and Man... and so, how necessary it is *for your sake* that He focus Nicodemus on Jesus’ necessary intercession for us:

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

And, we don’t have to belabor this point because we know it well: as Moses was told to fashion a bronze serpent that all may look on it and have God’s promise of life eternal, so live – forever – all who look on and cherish “for me” God’s promised Messiah. For, as Jesus himself says, this is the key piece to the puzzle; this is what bridges the fallen old creation to the perfect new creation... this is what ties the words of the first article of the Creed to the third article of the Creed: How could the holy God who made this perfect Creation then had to watch it torn apart by man’s selfishness, how could that same holy God stand to sanctify that man and bring him into the life of the holy Church and the new creation?:

“God *in this way* loved the world, that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish eternally but have life eternally. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it [for its fallen-ness] but to save it [from its fallen-ness] through him.”

This salvation narrative – and, truly, this over-arching narrative – defines every day of life. It gives you ability to rejoice in the things of the first creation (fallen though they are and discerning though you must be in living out God’s will in this fallen creation)... it gives you ability to rejoice in the God who created you because you have unity with Him through Jesus Christ and now – because of Christ – you may live in the sanctification anticipation of the life of the new creation to come.

Thus, rejoice in this Festival of the Holy Trinity; God grant that it defines for you every day of these six months ahead (and beyond), that you may always be found in your baptism... a dear child of God baptized:

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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