

The Holy Trinity: John 3:1–17

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Preached for Holy Trinity, Year B

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Today is Holy Trinity Sunday. On the western catholic calendar, Holy Trinity is the first Sunday after Pentecost. It's a day to take a big, deep breath and confess the incomprehensible – God as one divine Being in three Divine Persons, a Unity in Trinity and a Trinity in Unity. Or as we say, tri-une. “Neither confusing the Persons nor dividing the Substance.” But it's sure confusing, isn't it? We were baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We invoke the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And yet we never come any closer to wrapping our minds around it all this side of the resurrection. Now we know only in part. Three distinct Persons, yet only one God, one divine Being. It's one of the great paradoxes of the Christian faith. Something you can't rationalize or harmonize, you can only believe and confess it.

You may try to picture it, but be careful. Analogies tend to break down as quick as an old car on the freeway. Some compare the tri-unity of God to the three phases of water – solid ice, liquid water, gaseous steam. Liquid, ice, steam – three forms but it's all H₂O. It sounds good, but it doesn't hold water for long. You can have ice without steam and steam without liquid water, and in the end they are only three different forms of the same thing. It would be like saying that I wear three hats or have three roles. I'm a pastor, a husband, and a son. Three roles but only one person. But that doesn't work either. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit aren't modes or phases or roles. They're persons with whom one has a personal relationship.

The best I can offer is the mathematical cube, or as we have it all over the place around here, the triangle. The triangle has three distinct legs. Take away any leg, and you no longer have a triangle. The cube has three dimensions; lose any one and you no longer have a cube. St. Patrick tried using the three leaves of the shamrock with the Celts. But at the end of the day before I put my theology to rest for the day I just say, “In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” and leave it at that.

Holy Trinity Sunday is a reminder that we can't put God in a box or fit Him neatly inside our heads. We dust off that venerable 5th century creed named after St. Athanasius (though he himself didn't write it) and recite it with all its "undivideds" and "incomprehensibles" and when you finally make it to the amen, you feel as though you haven't quite said it all, or maybe you've said too much. And that's good. The apostle Paul reminded us that now we see dimly through a smokey glass. We speak about God in terms of analogies, pictures familiar to us. And we are only given to say what God has revealed to us, no more nor less.

And that's really the point of it all. God tells us who He is. We don't make God in our image and likeness. That's an idol. God reveals Himself, and we try our best to say what God has revealed. And when all is said and done at the end of Holy Trinity Sunday, we won't be any closer to understanding God or explaining Him. But we will have confessed Him and worshipped Him.

Being Holy Trinity Sunday, it's also the "official" designated birthday of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church. It's Holy Trinity's 41st birthday, and like most of us who are approaching or have reached middle age, we don't make a big fuss about birthdays anymore. There's a bit of arthritis in her joints and she may have lost a step or two, but by the grace of the Triune God she's still making a decent run of it, and God doesn't seem to have given up on her yet. So happy birthday, Holy Trinity! Here's to many more.

It's also Father's Day, that day when more collect calls are placed than any other day of the year. Throw a steak on the grill, crack a beer, and turn Dad loose in the hardware store to buy some coveted power tool. Thanks, Dad. On Father's day we recognize that it takes two to conceive a child (modern medicine and the California State legislature notwithstanding). And it takes two to raise a child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and while mothers are important, fathers are equally important if sons and daughters are going to be able to walk on their own two feet when they grow up. Father's are God's instruments and gifts. Without them, we wouldn't be here this morning. So thank God for fathers.

God reveals Himself as Father. Not mother. Jesus doesn't teach us to pray, "Our Mother who are in heaven," though some misguided people try to fix the Lord's Prayer that way. Our Father. Father is where it all begins – the head, the source, begetter, provider, protector, defender. Fatherly goodness and mercy.

The Father begets the Son who sends the Spirit who proclaims the Son who brings us to the Father.

The Father loves the world, and in love for the world He sends His beloved Son into the world, not to judge the world but to be judged for the world to save the world.

The Son is lifted up, like the bronze snake that Moses put on the pole to save the snake bitten camp of Israel. Lifted up with our sin, lifted up on the cross, lifted up from the grave, lifted up to the right hand of the Father. Jesus embodies our sin in His body, so that we embodied in Him might become the righteousness of God.

Jesus on the cross is the antidote, the antiserum of the Law. How do you make antiserum? You expose something to the poison, and when it survives you draw antiserum from it. Jesus was cursed under the Law of God with our sin. He took the poison of our death into His own death. And He rose from the dead to be for all the antiserum of death itself.

Imagine having a vial that contains the cure for every disease known to man – SARS, AIDS, cancer, heart disease – you name it. In fact, it's the elixir of life, the fountain of youth, the miracle cure all rolled into one. That vial has a label on it and it reads "Jesus Christ crucified for your sins and raised for your justification." And it's all yours for free. You don't need approval from your primary care physician. You don't need health insurance. There is no cost to you. It is all there for you gratis in the word that forgives you, in the water of your Baptism, in the bread that is Christ's body, in the wine that's His blood. The ancient fathers called the Lord's Supper "the medicine of immortality." The death of Jesus is where the life is. And there's a promise: All who trust in Him will not be destroyed, but have eternal life.

This medicine comes delivered by the Spirit, whom I like to call the UPS delivery person of the Holy Trinity. "He will take from what is mine and make it known to you," Jesus said of the Spirit. He is the breath of God, blowing over the dry, dead bones of this world, and making them alive in Jesus. He's "the Lord and Giver of Life," who hovered over the swirling, chaotic waters of creation and who now broods creatively over the waters of Baptism to give us new birth in Jesus.

There was a rabbi named Nicodemus who came to Jesus late in the night. He comes in the darkness to the One who is the Light, seeking light. He doesn't really know what to ask Jesus. His head is full of questions. He breaks the ice by saying a few flattering things to Jesus. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God. For no one can do these signs which

you are doing, if God were not with him.” Nicodemus has heard stories – about water turned to wine, the deaf hear, the mute speak, the demons cast out. He wants to ask Jesus something, but he doesn’t know what it is or how to ask it. His religion is so tidy, neat, organized. Every doctrinal duck is waddling nicely in a row. And then there’s Jesus, this man from God who acts like God. Who on earth is He?

Jesus tosses Nicodemus a curve ball with a double amen. “Amen” means “listen up, open your ears, I’m about to say something really important.” “Unless one is born from above, he isn’t able to see the kingdom of God.” Is that what you want to know but are afraid to ask, Nicodemus? Do you want to see the kingdom of God? You need to be re-created, re-born from above. Your religion can’t do it. No religion can. You need to become something completely new, a new creation.”

Nicodemus is puzzled. “How? How can an old Jewish rabbi like me be born a second time? Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born? What are you saying, Jesus?”

Jesus tosses Nicodemus a fastball on the outside corner, again with a double amen. “Unless one is born of water and Spirit, he isn’t able to enter the kingdom of God. You see, what is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don’t be amazed. And don’t try to rationalize it or put it into one of your neat little boxes. You can no more box up the Spirit than you can capture the wind. All you can do is listen, hear His voice preaching to you, and believe it.”

Water and Spirit. Wind and water. That’s the creative womb for the Word to conceive and bear. In the beginning, when God made the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and empty, a chaos of watery nothing, and the Spirit of God fluttered over the face of the Deep. When the children of Israel came up to the Red Sea, the wind of God blew across the face of the sea, and the waters parted to let the Israelites through. When Jesus was baptized in the water of the Jordan, the Spirit descended like a dove as He stood there in the water. At Pentecost, when three thousand were baptized in water, the Spirit blew like a rushing wind through the church, giving the church breath to speak and languages to speak in. Water and Word, water and Spirit.

You must be born anew from above. That doesn’t mean you get to decide. You didn’t didn’t decide to be born the first time, did you? No one consulted you in your mother’s womb. And if you were like me and were baptized as a baby, no one consulted you about that either. In fact,

for most of the important things of your life, no one ever asked you. And even if you came to faith as an adult and were baptized after that, or if you are on your way to baptism now, it's still God's doing and not yours.

You must be born anew. Your first birth was a still birth, spiritually speaking. You were born in the darkness, like Nicodemus. Born dead in sin. All the sins that bug you, or don't bug you, those are the symptoms of your still birth. You may have topped the Apgar charts when you were born, you may have been bigger, longer, smarter, brighter, and more beautiful than all the babies in the nursery, but you were born into the death of your father Adam. And you inherited your father Adam's sin. Flesh begets flesh, and sinful flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. And you can't fix it. You must die and rise. You must be born anew.

You must be born from above. Not a second birth in the flesh (who would want to go through that a second time?). But a new, heavenly, spiritual birth, this time of the Holy Spirit. You must be born from above, where Christ came. Your first birth made you a child of father Adam. Your new birth in Jesus makes you a child of God.

This whole conversation leaves poor Nicodemus in the dark. "How can these things be?" he asked. Who can blame him? How was Nicodemus to know that the One he was talking to in the night, rabbi to rabbi, would one day hang in the darkness, in day turned to night, to take the sin of the whole world into His dark death? How as Nicodemus to know that three days later, the same Jesus would rise from the dead, to bring the world into the dawn of the first day of a new creation?

Somewhere along the way, the Spirit's breath and Jesus' words had their way with old Nicodemus. He and Joseph of Arimathea were the ones who took the body of Jesus from the cross and buried Him.

Water and Spirit equals creation, in the calculus of the Bible. Wherever there is water and Spirit there is new creation in Christ the Word. And so what Christ accomplished for all the world in His cross and resurrection, He does for you personally in the water of Baptism. If you are baptized, you have the irrefutable evidence from God Himself that you are new creatures in Jesus Christ. If you are not baptized, then by all means don't delay to receive this wonderful gift of water and Spirit. Christ was lifted up for you, and in Him you were lifted up to the right hand of the Father. And He wants you to trust Him, to take Him at His word, that in Him you are a new creation. The old is gone; the new has come. Sin is past, righteousness and

holiness are your future. You are a child of God, a member of the family. Jesus the Son invites you to pray with Him, "Our Father." The Spirit cries out with your spirit, "Abba, Father."

And you recognize that through all of your sufferings, your failings, your weaknesses, your sins, you are loved by the Father, through His Son Jesus, in the Holy Spirit. And in that triune love of God, you will live forever.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "John 3:1-17 (Trinity B)", posted 2003-06-15
(<https://htlcms.org/2003/06/john-31-17-trinity-b/>).