

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
May 26, 2024 – Trinity Sunday
John 3:1-17
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Today's lesson from the Gospel of John – the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus – is famous for their discussion of being “born again.” Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, a man of faith in God. He had recognized that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God by the “signs” that Jesus did. In John's Gospel the word “signs” refers to the miracles of Jesus, such as healing the sick, feeding the five thousand, and raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. Because Nicodemus believed that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God he wanted to know more about him. But he “came to Jesus by night,” that is, secretly. Why? Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a highly placed religious leader of the Jews. Jesus and his followers comprised a new movement. Jesus had openly challenged other Pharisees about their interpretation of the law of God. Seeking Jesus openly might not have been a wise move on Nicodemus' part, if he wanted to maintain his status and his reputation among his peers.

Nicodemus opens the conversation by saying that he recognizes Jesus as a teacher who has come from God because he has seen the miracles Jesus has done. Yes, he has seen the “signs,” but as for what is more important than the signs, Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” The exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus now hinges on the interpretation of a word with double meaning. The word can mean “from above” or “again.” Nicodemus interprets Jesus as saying “again,” and he asks the famous questions, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?” Jesus did not mean “again” in this sense. He meant “from above,” or from heaven, from the Spirit of God. This is the rebirth that is both possible and truly important, difficult to understand, but very real.

For many years in this country thousands and thousands of people have claimed to be “born again Christians.” To be “born again” involves having a conversion experience of some kind, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Many “born again Christians” claim to have experienced God's forgiveness of their sins through Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on the cross. They feel assured of eternal life. John 3:16, from today's lesson, is one basis of such assurance: “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.”

For many of us in Christian communities outside of evangelical Protestantism, the emphasis on being “born again” within those parts of Christian faith can seem not only foreign but overbearing. A one-time experience that forever-after results in a faith commitment may not be the way that many of us in the Episcopal Church experience and live our faith. Anglican spiritual writers, and those of other traditions like Orthodoxy and Catholicism, have made distinctions in the ongoing life of faith between a stage of repentance and forgiveness – the experience of pardon for our wrongdoing – followed by “justification,” or being in a right relation with God and our neighbors, and leading to a lifetime of efforts toward “sanctification,” or growth in spiritual maturity. An insistence that only one way of conversion – the way of being “born

again” – is legitimate goes against our own experience of faithful living. And for some, though not all, “born again” Christians, this insistence on a conversion experience is accompanied by a moral stance that includes such matters as acceptance of male authority and female subservience, a rigid morality largely concerned with sexual behaviors, and a de-emphasis on issues of social justice and responsible behavior towards others, very much including those outside the Christian faith. There are good reasons for us not to accept much of this.

Now let’s consider today’s special day on the church’s calendar, Trinity Sunday. Traditionally, Christians affirm that God is Three in One – the doctrine and truth of the Trinity, which we honor today. We affirm the essential unity of the three “persons” of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But in our lives of faith, as we pray and worship and find God in our lives, each of us may relate better to one of the persons than the others.

Let’s look at the persons of the Trinity. God the Creator or Father. Some of us are most comfortable relating to God as Creator because we experience a deep sense of connection to the natural world. Some of us relate best to God as Father or as Mother – the Parent who will never let us down or mistreat us, but who will love us completely and forever.

Many people relate most naturally to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus represents the human face of God or, as I have heard him called, “God with skin on.” We can relate to his human life – being born into a human family, growing and developing through the years, hearing God’s call to ministry, interacting with all kinds of people, and finally experiencing torture and death at the hands of people in power. We can relate to many ways of knowing Jesus – as friend, good shepherd, healer, teacher, role model. Jesus Christ is divine as well as human, and in his full divinity he redeems us, calls us to the new life of resurrection, to eternal life with God.

For some people, the Holy Spirit is the most “real” person of the Trinity. We may have experienced various gifts of the Spirit – knowledge and wisdom, faith, healing, and so on. Perhaps our most vivid experience of God comes from within us, as I spoke about last week.

At different times of our lives and in different circumstances we may relate best to any one of the persons of the Trinity. Hopefully, we know God in all three persons, in the fullness of God to the extent that human beings can know God. We might think of the three persons of the Trinity as a braid made of three strands of different colors. As our lives twist and turn, so the braid twists and turns and we focus on one color more than the others. But our hands, our lives, hold all three. The three persons of the Trinity are bound together by love – love forever given, received, and returned.

Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be born “from above,” from the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is of one essence with the Father and the Son. That essence is love. The love shown in creation by the Father. The love between the Father and the Son. The love of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, poured into the hearts of human beings. Love and goodness. Absolutely nothing else. That is the kingdom of God to which we are invited to be born again – again and again. In Jesus’ name. Amen.