

SERMON: Sunday 26TH May 2024

Text: John 3:1-17

Trinity Sunday -- Year B

We gather this morning on Trinity Sunday,
the only festival of the church that celebrates a doctrine –
a humanly created statement about the nature of God.

The doctrine of the trinity emerged slowly in the history of the church, referred to, but never fully defined in the Bible.

So put simply, it is a human attempt, and a pretty good one, to describe our experience of something that we acknowledge is ultimately beyond our ability to describe.

And when we try to describe our experience of God as Trinity the closest we come to is say that the nature or heart of God, and therefore the Trinity is ultimately relational, that while the God we worship is absolutely One God, we experience that God in relationship to three persons –

- God the Father and Creator,
- Jesus, the Son who heals and redeems,
- and the Holy Spirit, who enlivens and transforms.

The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that the central characteristic of God is relationship.

If that is how and who God is,
and we are created in that image,
It is our nature also, to be in relationship,
with each other.

But also it should be remembered,
our experience of God and his relationship to us,
has shown that the foundation
of that relationship also includes freedom,
the ability to choose whether we even want to be
in that relationship or not.

Our gospel reading gives us an example of
how we can struggle with that choice.

Nicodemus was a man of his world.
He was a good man, an observant Jew, a Pharisee.

But he is also a man of accommodation.

He lives comfortably within the Roman rule of his time,
making the necessary accommodations
between Jewish and Roman law.
He needs nothing. He had nothing to fear.

But Nicodemus listens carefully to the world around him,
and what he hears about this man
named Jesus is impressive.

He wants to know more.
He senses that great power – maybe even divine power –
surrounds this man.

Such power might threaten the authorities.
Nicodemus was not entirely seduced by the Roman order.
Perhaps an overthrow might be a good thing.
Maybe, or maybe not!

And so he went to Jesus by night, not openly in the day.
He wants to hear from Jesus what the plan would be.

What was this kingdom Jesus refers to?
Would there be armies?
Who would lead them and organize them?
Jesus' answers to Nicodemus' questions were,
I am sure from Nicodemus' point of view totally off the wall.

There was no plan,
no business model,
not even a vision that made any kind of sense.

Instead Jesus talks of birth, and of the wind.
He speaks of being connected, of being together,
of being joined by a common belief.
He speaks of knowing what cannot be known –
that the wind blows although we cannot see or control it.
He speaks of heavenly things,
and refers to Moses, the great father of the faith.
Finally, he speaks of love,
a kind of unconditional love
that gives life to everyone who will accept it.

None of it made sense in Nicodemus' world.
The gospel does not tell us exactly how
Nicodemus reacted to Jesus' words, beyond his questioning.

It is clear that, unlike others, unlike Peter, and James and John, Nicodemus did not become a “follower.”

He remained a Pharisee.

He left Jesus and went home

and stayed at with what he could understand.

He remained a part of the humanly established order of things.

What Jesus was offering was not what Nicodemus expected.

Jesus was inviting Nicodemus to enter the kingdom,
to become “one of us.”

Far from suggesting war,

Jesus offered love, the most intimate of relationships.

Nicodemus couldn't go there.

It was much more than he had bargained for.

It was much worse than the overthrow of Rome.

It was really the overthrow of life as he knew it.

It meant his own personal world

would be turned upside down.

Isn't this the sticking point for all of us?

Don't we all come to God with our own ideas of who
and how God is and will be?

Don't we know in advance what we need and want?

When God's response doesn't match our ideas,

don't we all to some extent,

either want to, or do return to business as usual?

When God comes to us with something outrageous,

something that would turn our world upside down,

don't we get confused or discouraged

and go back to our broken lives wishing for more,

but convinced that what God offers

will not produce the more -- we think we need?

All of us come to God full of our own knowledge,

our own ability to love.

And the story of Nicodemus reminds us that our knowledge,

our love is not ever the point,

not ever at issue.

Long before we show up under cover of darkness,
God already knows us and loves us.

God wants to draw us into the mystery of life
that is beyond our understanding,
beyond our human wisdom.
God waits only for us to be willing.
(Notice the freedom of choice here.)

God promises that eternal life,
which some may call heaven,
can begin right now, right here, in this present moment.

It begins when we love God and love one another.
Everything else – EVERYTHING – rests on this.
This is the foundation of ethics, of social justice, morality.

It is all about right relationship.
What we call good and evil depends on how we love one another.
The respect we offer each other,
the hospitality we give to strangers,
all of it is founded in God's love
freely given
and in our willingness to accept and share that love.

This is what it means to be born again.

Not as it has been hijacked by other groups....

To be born again is enter God's love,
accept it and share it with others.

That is the entry point for eternal life –
not death to this mortal life,
but death to self –
the letting go of ego and the acceptance of God's love.

We have got to get away from thinking
that eternal life is some sort of carrot
dangling at the end of our noses,
which we only reach after of years of pain and suffering.

Jesus is trying to make plain to Nicodemus
that eternal life begins when we are willing to discover ourselves,
to know ourselves in relationship
to a God who may be beyond our knowing,

but who loves us with a passion that will never let go.

And that secure in that love,
we can reach out to others,
loving them not because they are worthy,
but because they are loved also by this same amazing God.
Well, I think we can see
how that would turn anyone's world upside down.

You can hear how it would
and does challenge things like:
conventions and convictions
and rules and standards and norms.

In essence this living and loving of this relational God
and self and others – is really communion –

And you know we as it were
rehearse it every time we come to this table.

1. Here we remember God's gift of creation,
the breath of God sweeping across the waters of chaos.
2. Here we remember God's gift of salvation,
his gift of redemption that came in the person of Jesus
who lived and died that we might be able to die and live.
3. Finally we celebrate the gift of God's Holy Spirit
who somehow takes our great human diversity
and makes us one body,
and empowers us to offer God's healing love to the whole world beyond these doors.

The heart of the mystery is that –
the more we give, the more we receive.
The more love we give away,
the more love is poured out upon us.

The more food we offer,
the more our own hunger is appeased.

The more we save others,
the more we ourselves are saved.

It is not something we understand.
It certainly is not something we can organize and plan.
It does not follow any reasonable rule of human understanding

It is, simply, a God thing.

“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.”

PRAYER...

*O God, your name is veiled in mystery,
yet we dare to call you Father;
your Son was begotten before all ages,
yet is born among us in time;
your Holy Spirit fills the whole creation,
yet is poured forth now into our hearts.
Because you have made us and loved us
and called us by name,
draw us more deeply into your life,
that we may glorify you rightly,
through your Son, and in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever. **Amen.***