

First Sunday after Pentecost - Holy Trinity

Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church

Farmington, NM

June 11, 2017

John 3:1-17 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. **2** He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

3 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

4 "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

5 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. **6** Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. **7** You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' **8** The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?**11** Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. **12** I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? **13** No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. **14** Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, **15** that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

"The Triune Rescue Plan for Humanity"

Planning out the next few Sundays led me to bring it all together under the title "Did God really say...?" It's an important question whether you have been a Christian ever since you can remember or whether the basics of Christianity are still coming into focus for us. It's important because we all just believe certain things. We don't even always know why. We assume they are true because someone told us they were in the Bible. Or we figure everyone believes it, so popular opinion pretty much settles the issue. Personal experience allows us to see and test and figure some things about on our own. But it's important for us to ask some tough questions. Especially when it comes to really important issues that matter beyond today or tomorrow. And so today, let's see if God really said that all religions are basically the same.

Our world likes Jesus. If you took a poll of the figures in history who have made positive contributions to our human race, Jesus would be at or near the top of that list whether you asked Christians, Muslims, Jews or atheists. We put Jesus on the Mount Rushmore of spiritual leaders. He belongs up there right next to Mother Theresa, Ghandi, and Martin Luther King Jr.

And now we are getting into issues that are deeply personal. We have our own opinions about the most important leaders or teachings of philosophies that guide us in our spiritual lives. We understand that we have opinions about where to find the best cheeseburger in town or which is the best baseball team. And those opinions might not be shared by everyone else. And we're ok with that. We treat our ideas about spirituality the same way. Not everyone shares my beliefs. Something else works for them, great. Go with that. We brush aside "dogma" in favor of a much more flexible spirituality. We can mold our spirituality to our personal preferences and keep them in tune with the spirit of our times.

When it comes to doctrinal statements and credal formulas like the one we just recited, we can't help cringing just a little. That is, until you meet someone like Nicodemus. Now Nicodemus was a respected religious leader of his people at the time of Jesus. And he had developed a favorable opinion about Jesus. It seems he was speaking for many of his friends, other experts on religion when he came to meet with Jesus, because he says: **"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."** (John 3:2) Nicodemus calls him rabbi or religious teacher. He acknowledges God's presence with him and in him in a special way. All pretty positive opinions about Jesus.

But that simply wasn't good enough. Jesus sounds rather exclusive in his response to Nicodemus. First he says: **"no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."** (John 3:3) Then he doubles down: **"no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."** (John 3:5) Jesus continues with this rather intolerant kind of talk, using words like "must" and "the world" and "everyone" for matters of personal spiritual practices and beliefs. See, for Jesus, this isn't merely a matter of opinion. It's a matter of spiritual life and death. He determines to lay about before Nicodemus and us the Triune rescue plan for all humanity.

1. God the Father Plans It

Part of our natural aversion to religious dogma comes from a simple misunderstanding. (Some of it comes from a much deeper problem. But we'll get to that a little later.) We know that the Bible is full of different stories. But maybe it is better to think of these as episodes under one big story that runs throughout the entire book of the Bible. We have that one main story highlighted as a summary of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Even if you've never sat down to study the Bible in depth you are probably familiar with John 3:16: **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."** It's helpful to remember the other episodes of the Bible are tied in some way to this main theme: God loved the world and demonstrated it by sending Jesus.

So there is a thread, a common story throughout the Bible. And it reveals God the Father's plan to rescue all of humanity by sending his Son to carry out that rescue. But there is complete harmony between this one story of the Bible and the doctrines of the Bible. Doctrine sounds like some medieval torture device for naughty Sunday school children, but it really just means Bible teaching. Doctrines are questions we have about individual issues or topics on life. We comb through the Bible to see what Genesis through Revelation says about this single issue. Then we compare it to other parts of the Bible to formulate a clear and cohesive teaching we can hold onto and use for our Christian living.

Now isn't that a lot less scary than thinking about doctrine as a product of some secret committee? A bunch of middle-aged guys in tweed jackets bartering back and forth to hammer out religious legislation inside a smoke filled room? Doctrines or teachings come up organically from questions and challenges to the Christian faith. They have the added benefit of giving us a careful and legitimate standard to use to gauge our own opinions and preferences about spiritual truth. We have God the Father's plan for humanity. It is centered on the love He gives us in His Son.

It's really helpful to see how the story of the Bible and the teachings of the Bible are really unified. It helps because we have a particular disease as modern people. We pride ourselves in being thoughtful and aware. We aren't just aware of ourselves and our history, but also aware of the opinions and beliefs of other people. And we sincerely want to be sensitive about their beliefs. That's true even when it comes to emotional and personal matters of spirituality. It's especially true when it comes to matters of faith.

Unfortunately, that's as far as we get without digging any deeper. As long as everyone has some spirituality, as long as they believe something, that's what really matters. Hmmmm, let's use an extreme example to evaluate that personal belief. Just this past week we heard about people who ran over pedestrians on a bridge in London. Another assailant armed with a hammer and knives attacked a crowd in Paris. They had their own religious beliefs. Their actions were actually motivated by religious beliefs and their opinion that these were actions done for their god and their god's name.

Coming to grips with the story and the teaching of the Bible leaves us with the conclusion of our own problem. We haven't evaluated our beliefs deeply enough. We aren't aware of the seriousness of the problem. It's simply not good enough to come up with simple solutions for our spirituality that satisfy our own inquiries and then leave it at that. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity helps us see that God has a plan. Actually, it is the plan. It's not just some vague feeling of love. It takes a definite direction and leads to specific actions.

2. The Son Carried It Out

God the Father's plan takes into account the deficiencies of our own spiritual beliefs and opinions. Notice that is exactly the approach Jesus took with Nicodemus. Jesus was telling him it wasn't good enough what sort of beliefs he had devised. You can't come up with your own spiritual solutions and then just use Jesus as an add on. Jesus calls for an entirely new life. You have to have birth from God, not from your inner thoughts.

Let's take a closer look at God the Father's plan of love. John 3:16 says: **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."** God the Father gave his Son Jesus as the ultimate gift of love. Your heavenly Father didn't just give Jesus as a gift for you to unwrap and play with. Out of love, the Father gave his Son over to die.

Jesus makes a comparison to an event back in Israel's history. While the children of Israel were wandering in the desert, they rebelled against God. As punishment, they were bitten by poisonous snakes. God gave Moses a rescue plan for that venom surging through their bloodstream. Lift up a bronze snake on a pole. When the Israelites look at it, they will live. See, doing your own thing can actually be pretty dangerous. Believing what you want and shrugging your shoulders at your friends' beliefs, can be poison.

Jesus uses that event to give us an antidote. Jesus says: **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."** (John 3:14,15) Jesus had to be lifted up. He was lifted up on a cross. It seemed like the most unlikely rescue. A dying Son of God sounds like the worst solution to the poison infecting us all. But when Jesus was lifted up on the cross, when his life was draining away, he became the remedy for all false medicine that just make us sicker. Jesus gave up his life so you will live. Look to Jesus. He carried out the plan to rescue you from false beliefs and faulty spiritual solutions.

3. The Spirit Makes It Your Possession

So God the Father had a plan all the way back in Genesis to rescue all of humanity. Jesus, God's own Son, executed that plan. Now what? What good does that plan do for you? Now there is a crisis. Here's what you are left with: **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,**

that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) It’s a choice between living life on your own terms, going through life with your own solution. Or receiving the Father’s plan of the Son’s sacrifice for you. Life with God’s antidote or life with poison ending in spiritual disaster and destruction. Not really must of a choice.

Think of it the way you think of your medical treatment. You know something is wrong. You don’t feel right. You can’t do the things you need to do. You don’t need to be a doctor or have expert knowledge about human anatomy and physiology. You just need to know your doctor is capable of diagnosing your malady and prescribing a cure. You just need to take the medicine. That’s what the Holy Spirit does for you. The Holy Spirit gives you the benefits of the Father’s plan, makes you the beneficiary of the Son’s sacrifice. You might not know how it all happens. But it’s good enough to know that the Holy Trinity is working for you.

Jesus confronts the expectations of Nicodemus. He is willing to confront and clash and do battle with the prevailing notions about spiritual belonging and finding real spiritual security with God. God has to do it. And God doesn’t tweak what you already have. He doesn’t take your pretty good life and just improve it. He creates new. He gives new life. He makes you a new person

For all the moments when you lie awake sleepless, stumped by life’s absurdities and the mysteries of the universe, here’s your chance to channel your inner-Nicodemus. Go to Jesus. Go to him at night under the cover of darkness if you have to. But go to Jesus and pour out your heart to him. Explain what you think about him and share all your opinions about him. And then prepare to be amazed. Prepare to be amazed by the way Jesus is willing to upset opinions and get right to the truth. Jesus wants you to know the simple truth of your salvation. You might not ever be able to formulate any Athanasian Creed 2.0 or diagram the relationships between the three persons in the one God. But you can find new life in the plan set down by the Father, carried out by the Son and made personally yours by the Holy Spirit. Go to Jesus to find the Triune rescue plan for all humanity. Amen.