

Status Change

A Sermon for The Festival of the Holy Trinity - 30 May 2021

St. Andrew Lutheran Church - Franklin, Tennessee

Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17 - Julian Gordy

The Festival of the Holy Trinity is unique among the church's celebrations in that it is not a commemoration of an event in the life of Jesus or of the church, but is the celebration of a doctrine, and a challenging one at that. The doctrine of the Trinity is not spelled out in scripture, but it is implied in many places. And since the early fourth century, the creeds of the church have insisted that God is one unity and yet three persons or personas. God is both that holy majesty that Isaiah trembles before in our first reading and also the intimate "Abba," or "Papa," St. Paul writes about in our second lesson, nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

God as Trinity insists that God is totally other and beyond us but also intimately present with us - transcendent but also immanent. God is, on the one hand, beyond time and, on the other, once lived in the Middle East in the first century as a young teacher from the hills of Galilee.

This central doctrine of the church has been much discussed and argued about over the years. At times in the past, people have been killed for getting it wrong.

St. Patrick tried to explain it with a shamrock. I've heard pastors talk about water, steam, and ice, or "I'm a pastor; I'm a father; I'm a husband." And on and on. Still, pretty much anything one can say about the Trinity is wrong or at least incomplete. The Holy Trinity remains a holy mystery. Like recent cosmological explanations of the universe (or universes), this is hard to get your mind around.

My current favorite explanation of the Trinity comes from Frederick Buechner. He writes, "The doctrine of the Holy Trinity means that the

mystery beyond us, the mystery among us and the mystery within us is the same mystery.”

Professor Diane Jacobson says, maybe the point isn't about “having information about God but [about] responding to an invitation to a relationship with God.”¹

We see that invitation in today's gospel lesson, where we meet Nicodemus, a man who has had some considerable success in life. From what we read about him in John's gospel, we can surmise that he is respected for his knowledge about God. He is a religious scholar, a man who has read the right books and studied with the right teachers. And he has become a member of the highest religious court in the land, the Sanhedrin.

Nicodemus also thinks deeply about faith and meaning. He is curious enough about the truth that he goes to talk to the controversial and charismatic young rabbi Jesus face to face.

But he goes at night. Nicodemus is not ready to go public with his interest in Jesus. He's not quite ready to be seen in daylight with someone as unorthodox and controversial, as radical and out of the box as this young teacher from the hills of Galilee.



¹Diane Jacobson in *New Proclamation*, Year A 2002. Emphasis is mine.

Seminary professor Deborah Kapp says that *“If any character from the Bible can be regarded as representative of twenty-first-century church members, it might be Nicodemus.”*² His relationship with Jesus is a tentative, quiet, private matter.

Know anybody who feels that way about their faith? Anybody who thinks that faith is personal, just between you and God, that religion should comfort us but shouldn't make waves or interfere with politics or, God forbid, business?

Besides, as a respected religious leader, Nicodemus is supposed to know the answers to life's big questions. And, if you're supposed to have it all figured out, you can't risk people seeing you going to some young rabbi for a second opinion. So he comes to Jesus at night when no one will notice.

At the start, Nicodemus professes that he is impressed with Jesus: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher straight from God. No one can do these signs that you do if God is not in it.”

But Jesus ignores Nicodemus' flattery and seems to know what this good Pharisee is really looking for. He says, “You can't even see the kingdom of God unless you are born from above.”

All of the study, all of the knowledge, all of the creeds, all of the sophistication in scripture and philosophy and theology, all the good reputation in the community won't even give you a peek at what God is up to. You need to be born from above.

There follows a familiar conversation in which Nicodemus can't get Jesus' meaning because he keeps taking everything Jesus says literally. “How can a person climb back into the womb and be born a second time?” he asks. I imagine Jesus rolling his eyes.

In a recent book on social science and John's gospel, Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh point out another reason for Nicodemus' reluctance to

²1 Deborah Kapp in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*.

hear what Jesus is saying. In that time and place birth status was the single, all-important factor in determining a person's standing in society. The station into which you were born pretty much determined your place in life until you died. There was no ladder to climb.

So, a new birth that Jesus is talking about would bring about a new status for Nicodemus. To be born a second time for would mean giving up a perfectly good and comfortable old life and identity and swapping it for something not quite fully spelled out.³

So what Nicodemus hears Jesus say is that he must let go of his current pretty-high status in the world with its distinctions and hierarchies and well-known rules and rituals, and accept a new status built on a relationship birthed by the Spirit. Nicodemus is understandably a little skeptical.

Jesus doesn't do much to allay Nicodemus' fears or make it easier for him. He points out instead that all of this status changing happens at the cost of a great deal of control. "The wind - the Spirit - blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

If Nicodemus is to become a full participant in the Reign of God which Jesus has come to bring about, Nicodemus is going to lose a little of control of his life. Living in the freedom Jesus promises is living at the impulse of the Holy and Unpredictable Spirit. And that can be a terrifying prospect for us religious people who tend to be happier with a well-worn rule book!

In fact, there's the trouble with Jesus, isn't it? If signing on to follow him is a matter of *knowing* the right things or *doing* the right things or *worshiping* the right way, I can handle that. But if it means not being in control. . . well. . . that's a far, far more difficult proposition. I'd suggest that the unease we've all felt over our worship life during this time of COVID is pretty good evidence of that.

³2 Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh in *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, quoted by Brian Stoffregen at his CrossMarks web site.

For Nicodemus, little private, night-time religion is okay, but following Jesus, trusting God with our whole heart, letting the Spirit blow us about where she wills? Who knows where *that* might lead. And who knows what that might *cost*?

I wonder if that might be where this church is these days. For centuries we've known how to do church. We've nailed down our creeds and codified our doctrines and defined acceptable behavior and divided the world into those like us who've got it all figured out and those like them who are sorely lacking. We've accepted our role as the world's morality police and keepers of the status quo.

And, as was true for Nicodemus, these words of Jesus may not bring much immediate comfort if we think carefully about what they mean. The Spirit blows where *it* wills. It is not easy for us in-control people to accept that the Spirit's ideas and ours may not be the same. It's not easy for us status-minded people to accept that our status in the world may change at the will of the Spirit and for the sake of the gospel.

Here at St. Andrew, as in many congregations, we are worried a bit about our future. Will people come back after COVID? Will we get back on track with building and growth? What will our new pastors mean for the life of the congregation? Will they bring uncomfortable change?

All of this makes things seem a little out of control. But isn't there freedom here too? When we know that we are not in complete control, when we quit worrying about ourselves, about our status, about our survival and give ourselves over into the hands of a loving God to trust in the love of God and in the always abiding presence of Jesus in the church that he loves, no matter its status in the world or ours.

In the gospel lesson, typical of John, Jesus conversation with Nicodemus morphs into a bit of a theological discourse and Nicodemus disappears.

But we do see him again. Nicodemus went public with his faith in Jesus when going public really mattered. In chapter 7, he shows up coming to Jesus' defense in the Sanhedran court.

And, finally, we see Nicodemus one last time at the cross. When most of Jesus followers had fled for their lives, Nicodemus was there to take Jesus' battered body down from the cross and wrap it in linen for burial – not exactly the behavior of a casual follower.

There is Nicodemus at the cross. The place where we see most clearly that God loves the world. At the cross we encounter most clearly the mystery that is the Holy Trinity. At the cross we learn that the Holy Spirit is present even in the deepest darkness and confusion. At the cross we learn that God will turn death into abundant life, the life God intends to be our destiny.

