

First Sunday after Pentecost; Holy Trinity; June 4, 2023

+ John 3:1-15 +

“See the Trinity’s Love in His Works”

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with him.”

Jesus replied, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”

Jesus answered, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God! Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be surprised when I tell you that you must be born from above. The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

“How can these things be?” asked Nicodemus.

“You are a teacher of Israel,” Jesus answered, “and you do not know these things? Amen, Amen, I tell you: We speak what we know, and testify about what we have seen. But you people do not accept our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven.

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

Have you ever had those days when you just weren’t being yourself? Something or someone made you grumpier than usual. Maybe it was lack of sleep, a bad review at work or your favorite team lost. A person who knows you well and loves you will tell you (hopefully gently), “You’re just not yourself today.” Because they know and love you, they know when your actions just aren’t lining up with who you are.

It is important to act like the person you are. Once, while attending a conference in the tiny rural town of Savanna, Illinois, I walked to a local café for lunch. I picked up a local paper. This town was so small that on the front page was the story of a local couple celebrating their 40th anniversary. How were they celebrating? With a cruise or a party? No, I smiled as I read that they were celebrating by monitoring their calving barn. That’s being who you are. We all know fake people, too, people who try to be someone they’re not. They’re hard to trust.

It’s best to be real, to simply be who you are consistently, to let people see who you really are by what you do. That’s what the Triune God does. And he does it always, and does it perfectly. No bad days where his

works don't match his nature. You can always tell who he is by watching what he does. And on this Trinity Sunday, we see the God who calls himself love work in love for us.

Jesus leads Nicodemus to see that in this Gospel. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. His motives for doing this are not stated, and so we might as well not guess. But watch what Jesus does: when a man who fancies himself a spiritual expert but is actually a spiritual dunce, who is a member of a group who hates Jesus' guts, comes to Jesus in the middle of the night, Jesus...receives him. And speaks to him. And explains things to him. Can we already see God's love in how Jesus treats Nicodemus, even before Jesus says a word?

Nicodemus speaks first: **"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with him."** Again, there are many guesses for exactly why Nicodemus says this. But his motive is less important than what he actually says. It is true that Jesus is a rabbi, a teacher. And it is true that Jesus comes from God and does miraculous signs. But his knowledge of this God Jesus comes from is incomplete. So Jesus puts a stop to the niceties and cuts to the chase: **"Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God."**

When we list the members of the Trinity, we say, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Jesus chooses to work in reverse order to show the Trinity's love in his works. He starts with the Spirit, who shows God's love by giving birth from above. We are born the first time below by our mothers. We are born the second time from above by the Spirit. And we need it because – and, brace yourself now, because I'm going to say something bad about your mom and I know people get very upset when you do that, but I have to! – your mom was sinful when she gave you physical birth. And don't punch me! Jesus says so: **"Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh."** In the Bible, "flesh" is the sinful flesh. That's what you were, in your physical birth.

But see God's love in the Spirit's work! **"Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit."** The Spirit gave you a second birth, from above, and gave you spiritual life. And what love it was! If he had not done this for you, you would have no spiritual life, and no promise of heaven: **"Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God!"** But you can enter the kingdom of God! And you will! Because you received the birth of faith in the waters of baptism, when the Spirit worked in your heart.

And it was not your choice. It was his. You did not choose your first birth: your parents, your birthday, your gender, your social status, the wealth (or lack thereof) or your family. No asked you where or when you wanted to be born, or if you wanted to be born at all. It happened to you, by someone else's work. And so did your second birth, your spiritual birth. The Spirit chose it for you. And why? **"The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."** Why did you receive this birth from above, to enter and see the kingdom of God? Because the Spirit was pleased to give it to you. See God's love in the Spirit's work.

But what exactly are you born into, when you are born from above? Why does this birth get you into the kingdom of God? Because of the love the Son has shown you with his work. **"No one has ever ascended into heaven, except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven."** The point of this statement is confusing to many. It does not need to be. Jesus is making it clear that he, just like the Spirit and the Father, is God. You see, many people in Jesus' world believed in gods and demigods that became gods in time. They did some great feat, or rose up to heaven to meet the gods, and then they became gods themselves. Jesus says it doesn't work that way. People don't ascend into heaven and then become gods. But it does work in reverse. God came down from heaven and became a man. Jesus, who is God, came down from heaven and took on human flesh. That's why he calls himself "the Son of Man." But

he's still God! Jesus says even those he's descended from heaven he **is in heaven**. He's still in heaven even while he's on earth, and only God could do that!

So Jesus teaches that he is God who came down from heaven and became human. Why would God do such a thing? It is another work of God that shows his love for us. Jesus surrendered heaven's glory and took on human flesh for us. **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."** Jesus is referencing a story from the Old Testament. In the wilderness, the Israelites moaned and groaned against the Lord and against Moses. Finally, the Lord had enough and disciplined them by sending poisonous snakes to bite. Then they cried out with sorrow for their sin, and the Lord gave them a solution. Moses hoisted up a bronze snake on a pole, and everyone who looked at it in faith was cured and lived.

This is what Jesus came to do, on a much larger and more important scale. Everyone is born in sin. It is our snake bite. Sin is poison for the soul and it is deadly to both body and soul. If it is not cured, body and soul perish forever in hell. Jesus came down from heaven and became human, but without sin. He was born without it, because the Holy Spirit conceived him the virgin Mary. And Jesus lived without sin. He never grumbled or complained or did anything else against God's will. And then he was lifted up. He was lifted up on the cross to bleed and die, taking the punishment our sin deserved. And now, everyone who looks at Jesus in faith – remember: that's the Spirit's work – is saved, body and soul for eternity.

What love we see in the works of the Triune God! The Son comes down and becomes one of us, to be lifted up as the holy sacrifice for our sins. And the Spirit gives us new life to look at Jesus in faith and be saved. What love!

But still we can ask why. Why did Jesus come in love to save? Why does the Spirit come in love to give faith? Because the Father sends them in love for us. **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."** God "so loved" the world. We must understand "so loved" the right way. It does not mean that God the Father loved the world lots and lots and lots. Don't get me wrong! He does love the world lots and lots and lots. But here it technically means something more like this: "God loved the world in this way..." See? The Father also loved us and also showed it by working for us!

He is the one who sent his only, dearly loved, eternal Son on that mission to live and die for us. He is the one who sends the Spirit so that we are among the "whoever believes in him." And because we are among those who believe, we are also those who shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Math in the Bible does not often work like our math. Marriage is one example: When a man and woman are united in marriage, the two become one. The Holy Christian Church is another example. Billions believe in Jesus, and he brings them together as one flock with one Shepherd. The Trinity is another example, but it's even more mysterious than the others. It's not just that multiples are one, but that they are One and remain Three separate and distinct at the same time. That is a truth we cannot comprehend, but only believe by the Spirit's work.

But the Trinity is not just confusing. If it were only that, no one would bother with it. No, the Trinity is love, love that the Spirit uses to call us to believe in the Trinity, even while we cannot fully understand it. Here is the heart of the Triune God: perfect love, not just spoken with words, been seen in the actions of each

Person: the love of the Spirit to give us birth again from above; the love of the Son to come down and cure our sin as he's lifted up on the cross; the love of the Father to send them both to save us.

See the Trinity's love in his works. See it, believe it, and love him back. Amen.