

**May 27, 2018**  
**Festival of the Holy Trinity**  
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**Peace Lutheran Church of Austin, Texas**

**GOSPEL**

**John 3:1-17**

The holy gospel according to Saint John, the third chapter.  
**Glory to you, O Lord.**

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup>The wind 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.” <sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup>“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>“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.

<sup>17</sup>“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

The gospel of the Lord.  
**Praise to you, O Christ.**

I wonder how long he practiced that opening line...how long he thought about how to start the conversation that would change his life.

However long it took...Nicodemus settles on "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God..." It just makes me think of book-signings or concerts I've been to...where I wanted to have that one perfect thing to say to someone who was so far out of my league it was amazing I was even getting to stand close to them...I wonder if Nicodemus felt like that already...or if the realization came gradually...how big a deal it really was....to get to talk to Jesus.

Regardless, he comes to meet Jesus for the first time at night...maybe because he was worried about his reputation as a Pharisee...Maybe he is worried about being seen with Jesus, even though he was so drawn to him...or maybe he comes at night because night was when a student went to their rabbi to study. Either way, this is one of just three moments we get to hear about ...three moments of what must have been the amazing story of Nicodemus' life...

But you know...for all the years I've loved Nicodemus and his hunger for understanding...for how captivated he is by Jesus...even while he's still also so confused...there is one thing that only occurred to me for the first time this year, after reading and loving this story for so long...

It occurs to me that this whole relationship might have been totally different if Jesus was somebody who could just...take a compliment.

"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God..." Nicodemus says. And Jesus can't just say, "Thank you," and sign his book and keep things moving. He has to start some confusing conversation about being born from above...or born again...He understands that Nicodemus didn't just come to tell him how great he is and get an autograph. He can see the hunger in his eyes.

Jesus sees what we barely often realize even about ourselves...that we are so hungry for connection...that we need it...we need each other...we need community...because we are creatures who have been crafted after the image of a God who is...at the very heart of things...a relationship...a community...a Trinity.

So no...he does not just say thank you and move on to who's next...because he knows we need more. He is part of a divine dance that has been going on from the beginning of time...and won't ever be satisfied to walk along...He wants to pull everybody onto the dance floor...(and not in the annoying, creepy, or arm-twisting way)...but in that way that draws you into the joy that lives somewhere beyond your sense of self-consciousness and maybe even a little bit of your self-respect.

God wants a grand party...with rich food...joyful dancing...and gowns that fill up the room. Did you hear those words from Isaiah? A colleague of mine, the Reverend Seminarian Elle Dowd said that all she could see when she read Isaiah's description of God's robe flowing down the throne and filling the temple was an extravagant Met Gala gown...

God is just so ready for us all to be at the party. I've heard the Trinity described as a dance before...now I'm beginning to think the dance isn't enough. God doesn't just want us at the party. God IS the party. The Trinity is a party...a community rejoicing...and God is all about drawing us and everyone into it...into God's very self. Always. God is drawing all things together...that is the fullness of the royal rule of God. Everyone at the party.

And that is why our human divisions and brokenness hurt God so much. It's not even that we've offended God's moral sensibilities when we hurt each other and break people and lives apart. It's that we turn away from the very being of God...the very nature of God. It is not so simple as to say it is *wrong* to break relationships or communities. It is less important that it is wrong...it is important that it is not of God. God...by God's own mysterious, multiple, communal, relational nature cannot be part of it.

Of course, we here on earth are not community perfected, like the Trinity is...and so living in this truth is complicated and hard. It is hard to be in community...even in the most loving families...the most lovely churches or groups of friends...Even the very conversation we witness in John's gospel today involved some challenging words...though we have no indication that either Jesus or Nicodemus got upset about them. But it is true that we will hurt and disappoint one another. It is true that loving each other does not mean we will not disagree about things that matter. If we don't own that, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, we are taking three steps back before we can move one step forward. And when we do move forward, to find the meaningful path, we may be called to walk headlong into those complicated spaces where we disagree instead of comfortably trying to skirt the edges to find the common ground that doesn't cost too much...but only because it isn't worth much.

Sometimes trying to live in relationship becomes so hard that we *have* to choose separation...because it is better than a relationship that is poison. So, please do not hear this message today as an exhortation to stay in relationships that take life from you and do not give it. God wants us to be connected in ways where life and love and joy are spread...and while God grieves with us when we are cut off from that possibility...God also knows that sometimes separation is the best thing this broken and breaking world can offer us.

But it is not what God dreams of for us. God's dream is the extravagant party...the nervous compliment spun into friendship, and ever-deeper connection...a conversation too wonderful to ever end...no matter how late at night it's gotten. No, Jesus can't just take a compliment...because he isn't here to feel good about himself and then just walk along...He wants so much more...

And that's why it grieves God so much when we are content to walk along...when we aren't so caught up in the dance and the party that we also want everyone to be a welcome part of it. The Trinity abhors division and fracture and separation...That's how I know the Trinity weeps a symphony of gasping ragged sobs...when children are taken from their parents...whether it

is at the hands of border agents not too many miles south of here...or by guns carried into their classrooms...or by those who radicalize people in the shadowed depths of the internet and entice them away from family and into lives of violence...

As much as God wants to be in the middle of the dance floor in a gown fit for the gods...I imagine God has to make sure to wear water-proof mascara for as many tears as the pain of this world brings.

I'm sure I couldn't begin to list everything in this world that brings tears to God's eyes...but today...when we ponder the mystery of the Trinity...I can see how those parts of our world that sever relationships...that draw lines between people...that bring destruction...must break a deep, deep place in God's heart. So this week we might think of those who have taken their last breaths in places of violence and fear...We might think of too many children taken by guns in this country...and also by the more formalized and somehow acceptable but no less painful violence of war and those who have fallen, often far from those they love, in military service.

We might think of these beloved children of God and ask what it will look like for us to choose not to walk along...but to honor the very image and nature of relationship and community and love that God placed in us by shaping us in the divine image. What does it look like not to walk along...but to find ways to be together at the party...where God's gown fills up the dance floor...but that doesn't stop anybody from getting out there...without a thought for how late at night it is...because we are in the presence of the community where we find our lives and true selves?

Might we find a glimpse of that life that we are so hungry for...and might we find the divine spark in ourselves to not walk along anymore.

May it be so. Amen.