

B Holy Trinity 5.26.24

John 3:1-17

Focus Statement: God is always ahead of us, welcoming us in.

It's Holy Trinity Sunday, a day at our church that is both fun and complicated. Fun because it's our name day. We're Trinity Lutheran Church, something about this idea of the Trinity inspired our predecessors to give us this name. Complicated because then we have to ask ourselves, what is the Trinity and what does the name mean for us. And the Trinity is a complicated concept. It is one theologians love to argue about. And I, I will tell you, am a practical theologian, not a systematic theologian. I deal in "what does our faith mean in our lives" rather than "how to we explain concepts of faith." Example of what I'm talking about. Part of the seminary curriculum includes two semesters of systematic theology. As a definition, systematic theology attempts to formulate orderly, rational, and logical explanations of various doctrines of the Christian faith. And I was ok at it, mainly because I had a good study group and a good memory, not because I really understood what I was saying. So one evening I'm prepping for a test with this study group, and we're going over the various types of atheism. My classmates were rattling through the various types and I was flipping through my notes, following along. They finished, and I piped up, "wait, I have one more written down here, what about shark boat agnosticism." "Shark boat agnosticism," one of them asked, incredulous. But I was insistent, "yeah, shark boat, I have it in my notes right here. Look, I even drew a little picture of a shark on a boat to help me remember." By this point my classmates were flipping through their notes. Now, here's where it's helpful for you to know that our professor, a brilliant, world-renowned, and well-published systematic theologian, was from Brazil, and I couldn't always understand his accent. Because seconds later, a classmate responded, "Kjersten, that's Sharp, Bold

Agnosticism. Not Shark Boat Agnosticism.” And that is how I got the nickname “Shark Boat” which followed me through seminary.

All this to say, trying to shoehorn God into words is always complicated, convoluted, and ultimately insufficient. Our words always fall short of explaining the one who is the Word made flesh. But we do it anyway because we are a people of words. Words, languages, phrases, ideas are how we make sense of the world around us.

This is what Nicodemus the Pharisee was doing, when he came to Jesus by night. A few words about Nicodemus, and few, because we only know a few about him. First off, he was a Pharisee, which indicates a certain level of education and authority. This man was a scholar, he was well-read, well-taught, well-trained. He came to Jesus with this declaration of Jesus as “a teacher who has come from God.” Describing Jesus as “a teacher who has come from God” is, we know the exact correct description of the one who, as we’ve read in the Prologue, “was with God... and was God,” and who, as Jesus himself will described later in this reading, God both gave and sent. So, yes, exactly right Nicodemus, Jesus was/is a teacher who has come from God. But Nicodemus didn’t understand the spiritual depth of the claim he was making about who Jesus was, as we’ll see as the conversation develops. Nicodemus questioned Jesus as a learned scholar like himself, not like the literal Word made flesh Son of God. Nicodemus also came to Jesus “by night,” meaning he was holding his cards close yet. He came to Jesus, he addressed him “we know,” indicating his role in a wider community, but coming at night meant no one else had to know he was coming to speak to Jesus. Night in John’s Gospel is often a metaphor for separation from God, by

coming at night, Nicodemus was keeping his distance. He could retain his identity as teacher, not be seen in the place of learner, questioner, seeker, identities his questions clearly show that he was.

And Jesus, I think, knew this, so Jesus poked at him a bit. Because the whole rest of the conversation is just word play. It's Jesus using words with two meanings, and Nicodemus totally missing the point. Right from jump, Jesus said, "very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born" and the Greek here is *anōthen*. Which is translated here "from above," which I think is the meaning Jesus intended. But it can also be translated as "again" or "anew." Nicodemus, we see from his follow-up statement, picked up on that second, literal, physical meaning. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Of course not, right. That's ridiculous. I can tell you from my current experience, Peanut is not yet born, and he already does not really fit in there anymore. There's no way he could come back in at a larger size. But that's not what Jesus meant. Jesus was referring to a spiritual rebirth, the sort of new life that came over the disciples last week when the Spirit entered them at Pentecost. And rather than clarifying, Jesus pushed on, "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of the water and Spirit... the wind blows where it chooses, and no one knows where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit." Nicodemus, totally lost, "How can these things be?" Jesus chided him, "are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" And then it just gets wilder, with talk of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness and talk of Jesus being lifted up, and ascending and descending from and into heaven, and salvation, light and darkness,

judgement and evil. And then the conversation just ends, and chapter four starts with Jesus and his disciples going to the Judean countryside where he “spent some time with that.” One can’t blame Nicodemus if he walked away wondering what had just happened. I know how the story ends, and John chapter 3 makes no sense to me. It’s beautiful, and I like to think about it, but I don’t understand it.

But the story doesn’t end here. Not for Jesus, not for us, and, for the rare time in scripture, not for Nicodemus. Because Nicodemus is not a major character in scripture, but he’s not a once off either. He’ll show up again in chapter eight, where he’ll give an, albeit very weak, defense of Jesus to his fellow Pharisees. Then he’ll be there again in chapter nineteenth, after Jesus has breathed his last, “bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes” to meet up with Joseph of Arimathea so that together they could bury Jesus “according to the burial custom of the Jews.” Nicodemus didn’t understand Jesus’ words in chapter three. Maybe he never does, the scripture doesn’t tell us. But something in him shifted and he found himself drawn into relationship anyway, in that way that big questions can tend to do.

When I was preparing for this sermon and thinking about Nicodemus and the Trinity, a line from last week’s Gospel kept coming to my mind. Jesus said to his disciples, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. That “now” says to me that Jesus believes there will come a time where we will be ready to bear them, that there is room for us to learn, to grow, to be challenged and changed by our relationship with God through the Spirit. And that, I think, is what the Trinity does for us. It gives us a picture of God that is incomplete,

because no picture of God could be complete, and in our questioning, wrestling, and wondering, we, like Nicodemus, find ourselves drawn deeper into relationship.

I have one more thing I want to show you this morning. Kind of hard to see from here, but I'll pass it around so you can get a closer look at it. This is an icon of the Trinity by fifteenth century iconographers Andrei Rublev. This icon depicts the Trinity as the three messengers of God who visited Abraham in Genesis chapter eighteen. The three are seated around a table with a chalice that looks like a communion cup in the center. The figures represent the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is designated by a house with open doors, the "house with many rooms" from John chapter fourteen. The Son has a tree, representing the cross. And the Spirit a mountain, alluding to all the times in scripture in which God reveals Godself in grand glory on a mountain. Each points to the next, Father to the Son, Son to the Spirit, and Spirit to this open space at the table.

And this open space at the table is what makes this icon so powerful. Because this open space at the table is left for us, the viewer. This open space shows the Trinity beckoning us into the relationship, inviting us to complete the circle. To do as Jesus had been commanding in the passages we read over the last few weeks from the Farewell Discourse and continue Christ's own work of pointing back to the Father.

Dear people of God, I think this is what the idea of the Trinity is meant to do for us. Despite two thousand years of theologians trying to make sense of it, I don't think it is meant to be understood. I think it is meant to point us to a God who is always just a step in front of us,

just a little bit larger than we had imagined. To pull at our wonder and curiosity so that we are drawn closer and closer to the table, and further into relationship with a God whose heart is relationship, that is why the One God is somehow, inexplicably also three, and inviting us into the dance. Thanks be to God. Amen.

