

Written Copy: John 3:3-8 "The Trinity at Work in Conversion"

Holy Trinity Sunday

Sunday, May 30th, 2021

Text: John 3:3-8

³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The text's intent

Demonstrate how the most learned men of Scripture in Jesus' day could not find their own way into the kingdom or even see what it is without the gift of rebirth that the Spirit gives in Baptism. God sends His Son as the Sacrifice for my sin, the Son willingly pays the price for my sin, and the Spirit comes into my heart and gives me the new birth of faith that holds all that Jesus has done to be for me. The Spirit in doing so works like the wind in ways that are beyond my understanding, yet His work is made evident in the faith created in my life. Jesus is the Father's gift not of condemnation, but to save people from the condemnation they were born into. Those who refuse the gift of rebirth of the Spirit refuse the sacrifice that makes them worthy of being in God's kingdom and leaves them as they were born into, a life of dying now and eternal death to come. But the gift of life eternal is from the Father, through the work of the Son, as brought to bear by the Spirit.

Focus Statement:

The work of conversion in my life was the purposeful working out of God's will by all three members of the Trinity. The Father sent His Only Son to be the sacrifice for my sin. The Father and the Son sent the Spirit down into my life and my heart to give me the new birth that brings the gift of faith so that I can hold Jesus' work of salvation as being for me. He remains in me and keeps me sealed in that faith.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We might see the reality of the gift of salvation to some and not others as an arbitrary thing. The Spirit is sometimes working on some but is not "blowing" on others. Or even that we were given the gift of faith and eternal life because we were in the right place at the right time. Or because Mom and Dad happened to see baptism as a necessary thing in our lives

What the hearer should do as a result:

Rejoice in the fact that my salvation was the purposeful working out of God's will from the beginning. All three members of the Trinity loved me so much they wanted me in God's eternal kingdom and worked together to make it happen. For that reason they continue to work in me so that I cannot be stolen out of the kingdom, and work to prevent me from falling away.

Subject Sentence: The Father by the Son through the Spirit grants faith

Introduction: Excluded from The Group

Have you ever shown up at a party, only to find that you really don't belong there? Perhaps it's all your spouse's side of the family and their friends, who you don't know very well. Or you show up at a friend's party only to find that you only know the host. But everyone else knows everyone else because they work together or are part of a social group that you are not a member of. It's a very uncomfortable situation, especially when you show up thinking you will be part of the group.

I had an experience like this at the beginning of my 4th year of Seminary. I had just arrived back in St. Louis from Vicarage in Chicago. The Fall Semester was about to start and the new Director of Music for the Chapel, who has come to the Seminary while I was away, was throwing a party at his house for all the Chapel Worship Assistants. The invite also went out to the members of the Chapel Choir, of which he was the director. As the guy who had been the regular soundboard technician for three out of my four years in Seminary, I considered myself to be a Chapel Assistant. Having received an email invite, I thought it would be good to get to know the new guys that had come to Seminary in my absence, as well this New Director of Music who I would be working with. Being away for a year makes it somewhat weird when you come back. There is a bit of adjusting to the Seminary life once again after being on Vicarage and functioning like a Pastoral Assistant. So I thought this might be a good way to get me assimilated back into the Seminary culture. I also thought some of my mates who had also returned from Vicarage would be at that party too. I was sorely mistaken. I was the only one. I was surrounded by a group of guys, mostly from the Choir, who I didn't know, and who didn't really see the need of getting to know me. I remember grabbing a cold one and going out to sit on the deck where about 10 other guys were swapping stories. It seems these stories revolved around a class they were all in the previous year with a professor who was new to the Seminary last year. I didn't know him and didn't understand all the references that they were citing. Then they proceeded to talk about experiences they had on tour with the choir. Not being in the choir this was also foreign to me.

I went in and tried talking to the New Music Director, who had once upon a time attended the mother congregation of my home congregation. So, we had some common experiences. But he was very distant. Instead, he spent a lot of time talking with his Choir members. I got the distinct impression that whoever this party was for, it was not intended for me. I ended up finishing my beer and faded out the door with nobody really noticing I had gone. I thought I was a member of that group, but it seems I was mistaken. The same could be said about Nicodemus in our Gospel Lesson today.

Nicodemus Lacks Understanding About the Kingdom

As the Lesson begins, we see Nicodemus showing up to talk with Jesus at night. This setting more than likely has a double meaning: it is night-as in the time of day, but also in John's Gospel night often has the symbolic meaning of the darkness that is symbolic of unbelief.

Nicodemus greets Jesus with what sounds like a compliment. **John 3:1-2** ¹ **Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.** ² **This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."** Nicodemus is saying, "Hey Jesus! Me and my Pharisee buddies have been talking about you, and it's pretty evident that, like us, you are a teacher of the Scriptures sent by God. God must be with you because you are doing some pretty remarkable things!" Now Jesus is in Jerusalem for the first of at least three Passover Feasts that He celebrated during His public ministry. Just prior to this meeting we see Jesus cleansing the Temple and raising the anger of the chief priests and rulers of the Jews. And the Pharisees would've been part of that group. So perhaps they are not as gung-ho for Jesus as they seem to be. And John prefaces this encounter with the following from **John 2:23-25** ²³ **Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.** ²⁴ **But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people** ²⁵ **and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.**

Jesus could see right through the flattery and knew there were ulterior motives for this visit. We are not told Nicodemus' reason for the visit, but the fact that he mentions his fellow Pharisees seems to mean that he is on an official visit. So, perhaps the flattery is a way to lead into a reproach from the Pharisees regarding some of Jesus' troubling teaching and actions. Nicodemus could be leading into the following: "Hey, we're all teachers of the Law. But we need to discuss some of these things that you are doing and saying because they're not kosher, they're not following the plan that we have laid out. We need to straighten you out on a few things regarding what it means to be working in God's kingdom. We need you to join in with us and be on the same page with us.

But Jesus cannot and will not be on the same page with them. Jesus is not the one on the outside, but Nicodemus and his Pharisee brothers are. They are on the outside of the Kingdom of God. **John 3:3** **Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."** Jesus is saying "Nicodemus, when it comes to the kingdom of God, not only do you stand outside, but you can't even see it, and so you can't know what it's about, let alone teach others about it.

Now these Pharisees were learned men who had studied the Scriptures. These were men that the ordinary Jew, including the Disciples, looked up to as one to learn from and to emulate. But since they didn't really know what it means to be in God's kingdom, they were leading the people astray. Their focus is on law keeping. And that law keeping included not only observing the Commandments of God in Scripture, but also manmade regulations that they had come up with. These were designed to keep one from ever breaking the commandments themselves. For example, in order to keep God's commandment of 'remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy by doing no work' the Pharisees decreed a specific distance that one could walk on the Sabbath before it would be considered 'work'. But the problem is that these things were never commanded by God. Being manmade they actually encouraged people to break what was at the heart of God's law, which is to show love for God and love for your fellow man. A Pharisee would refuse to help his neighbor if it meant walking more than the distance that they, not God, described as being work.

Jesus taught that the Sabbath was meant for loving and helping others as a way to give glory to God. In what the Pharisees taught they turned the focus away from salvation by grace and into works righteousness. They had forgotten that it was the sacrificial system where God granted them grace and forgiveness through the sacrificial animal that took their place on the altar. The animal died their death to forgive their inability to keep the commands of God in thought, word, and deed. Their manmade regulations could, if they actually followed them, prevent them from transgressing God's law in word and action. But they could not prevent the sin of the heart. Nicodemus thought he was an upstanding member of God's kingdom, but he was standing on the outside. He thought a person earned his way into the kingdom. Jesus is going to teach him and us that entrance into the kingdom is only by the work of God.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that to enter into God's kingdom he must be born again, or another way to translate that is to be "born from above". But that makes no sense to Nicodemus. **(John 4:4) Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"** Nicodemus can't understand what Jesus is getting at. Part of the reason is that he is looking at this concept of being "born again" from the viewpoint of the mother, where giving birth to a new life involves the baby leaving the womb and traveling down the birth canal. But Jesus is looking at the from the father's point of view. A new life begins in the mother's womb when the father's seed joins and fertilizes the mother's egg. Jesus is using this illustration to speak from the Heavenly Father's point of view where in a new life of faith begins with the work that the Holy Spirit does in the heart of each and every individual.

Purposeful Working of The Father Thru the Son By the Spirit

John 3:5-6 ⁵ **Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.** We rightly understand Jesus referring to the work that the Holy Spirit does in our baptism. This should not have been foreign to Nicodemus or the Pharisees. John the Baptist came as the way preparer for the Kingdom of God that Jesus was bringing by baptizing all who came to him for repentance. Jesus Himself was baptized, and there the Spirit manifested Himself in the form of a dove, with God the Father speaking His approval from heaven. In this we can see the pattern of God the Father sending the Holy Spirit into hearts to sow the seed of faith that results in this supernatural work of making one born again or born from above.

But what kind of faith is this? Faith needs to have an object that one puts their trust in. This is where God the Son comes into the picture. **John 3:14-16** ¹⁴ **And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.** To help Nicodemus understand something that has yet to happen, such as Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus uses an illustration that Nicodemus would know. The Israelites complaining in the desert, sinning against God. God sends poisonous snakes into the camp. They begin to bite the people and some die. The rest cry out to God to save them. God tells Moses to make a bronze likeness of the snakes and put it up on a pole for all to see. Those who look upon the snake, believing God's promised healing are in fact saved from death. In this illustration, Nicodemus, as well as you and I, can see understand the following: Moses in the story represents God, the poisonous snakes represent God's wrath over sin, the bronze snake on the pole represents Jesus who is our answer for the punishment we are due for our sins, the pole is the cross, the act of seeing represents our believing in what we have not seen with our eyes. The Israelites were granted physical life. When we look upon the cross and see Jesus as our sacrifice for sin, we are granted life now and eternal life to come.

Here Jesus gives us the pure Gospel Message that changes hearts and lives. Here we have the way one becomes a member of God's kingdom. Here we have the message that we as the Church, members of God's kingdom, center our lives of faith around. Conversion: the new birth that we are given in the water of Baptism, being born again, is best seen as the purposeful work of all three members of the Trinity. The Father sent His only Son because mankind whom He loved was lost in eternal condemnation, because you were condemned to eternal death. The Son came and willingly went to the cross as the sacrifice of love to pay the price for the sins of all mankind. He came out of the greatest kind of love for you to pay the price for your sins. And so that you might receive this gift of love that Jesus came to give, the Father and the Son send the Spirit into your life and into your heart to plant the gift of faith, the power that makes this work that the Father did through the Son for you. That's the love the Triune God has for you, and for me, and for all.

What This Work Should Mean to Us

What should all this mean to you? This work of the Holy Spirit in your conversion that happened in your baptism wasn't a chance thing. It didn't happen because your parents just happened to show up at church when there was baptismal water in the font. Sure, they called ahead and set up a date for it to happen. But this was all by the invisible hand of the Holy Spirit working through them to make sure that it happens as the Father desired, so that the gifts of the Son would be implanted in your heart by the Holy Spirit. Purposeful planning so that you would be placed firmly in the Heavenly Father's kingdom. The Father sent the Spirit to snatch you out of the devil's kingdom and through the powerful work of the Son to seal you with the Father's name through your faith in the work of Christ on the cross and rising from the tomb. The Trinity planned and purposefully carried all this work out for you because God wanted you in His eternal kingdom.

In my life I have seen the purposeful work of the Triune God to bring me back into the kingdom. As many of you may already know there was a period of my life when I had left the Church. I was not worshiping God, I was not confessing my sins, I saw no need for Jesus as my Savior. I had dismissed Him from my life. If things had continued on in this manner until I died, I would've been forever separated from His kingdom. But the Father was at work in my life in many ways to show me that my life lived under my own reign and rule was not good. I worried about money, my kid's, and the future. All these things were sent into my life by the Father for His purposes. Susan and I enrolled our oldest daughter Samantha in Lutheran School to provide what we thought was the best education for her, and to protect her from the drugs and evil of public school system. But we couldn't afford to keep her in that school without the discount one received by regularly attending worship service. In this too the Father was at work.

So, there I was in a Lutheran worship service, with long hair down the middle of my back, and a leather jacket on, and a chip on my shoulder the size of Texas. I wanted nothing other than to exit stage right as soon as the service was over. But the Holy Spirit interceded by arranging for two guys to meet me on the way out of the Sanctuary. Their names are Stu and Kirk. They saw something in me that rang a bell with their past. I started talking with them. Surprisingly, for me anyway, I found out that we shared a love for Rock n Roll music, specifically for the Beatles. The Spirit used them to make a connection of friendship with me. And because of that I found myself in attendance the following Sunday. And in that worship service the Father sent the Spirit to boldly proclaim to me the love of Jesus Christ as witnessed by His death and resurrection through the Pastor's sermon. The Holy Spirit opened my eyes to see Jesus as I had never seen Him before. There were so many other pieces that our Triune God used to bring this moment about. But the point is that this was His deliberate plan all along. When I had strayed from the faith, The Father through the Spirit kept His hand upon me and guided me to this precise place at that precise moment and the power of the Spirit made me born again, through faith in Jesus and His work, drawing me back into the eternal kingdom that I had fallen away from.

Conclusion

All of you are here not by chance or choice. None of you decided to be a Christian. You are here because of the purposeful work of the Triune God. He wanted you to be a part of His eternal kingdom. And He has drawn you here to this place to be a part of His Body worshiping and ministering as Lamb of God Lutheran Church. You are welcomed by the Triune God who loves you. You are welcomed by your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who love you. May you always have a place in His kingdom, both now in this world and forever in eternal life. Amen.