

Sermon Trinity Sunday Year B 2024; Gospel John 3:1-17

The Trinity, Unity with the Spirit, and Eternal Life

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day among other things to enhance our understanding of and relationship with our triune God, one God in three persons. That thinking—the theology of one God in three persons, all of the same substance—is a little complicated, I would say a little problematic for many of us. Where did this idea of a triune God come from? Let’s look into some of that history. Part of the problem surrounding the evolution of this theology was that people living in the time after Jesus’ death and after the gospels were written were trying to figure out just who this man Jesus was. They had different ideas. Was he just a human? Was he God? Something in between? What was his relationship with God? Was he of one essence or substance with God, or a “similar” substance to God? The synoptic gospels never refer to him as God, and in those three gospels Jesus himself never promoted the idea that he was anything other than human. John’s gospel, however, is different. It reflects classical Greek Platonic thinking. Whereas the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are mostly concerned with the human aspect of Jesus—his life, what he actually did and said—the writers of John dig deeply into the theological and spiritual meaning of Jesus. Without John’s gospel much of the way we think about Jesus today, in particular his divinity, would probably never have taken hold. It is ironic that the gospel of John almost didn’t make it into canon. But I digress! Back to this question of a triune God, one God in three persons: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Where did it come from? Scripture doesn’t mention the doctrine of the Trinity. So how did it develop? It took almost 400 years and seven councils for the church leaders to decide. In the year 312 Emperor Constantine had a vision of a shining cross made of light over the sun with the text “by this conquer,” an image with the combination of the Greek letters chi (X) and rho (P), still one of the most widely used symbols of

Christianity. You will find it above the reredos behind the altar here. While Constantine himself was likely more “superstitious” than strictly Christian, it was partly because of this vision that in 313 he legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire with his Edict of Milan, eventually culminating in Christianity becoming the religion of the Empire. During this time people including the Roman emperors wanted the many factions within the evolving religion to come up with some definitions about what exactly this new religion was. There was too much division within the church, too many different ways of thinking about the Christ Jesus. For Emperor Constantine it was a religious and political mess, and he wanted unity. Ruling over a unified church would be easier than ruling over a divided church. Was Jesus divine or not? Was he created like other humans, or somehow differently? So bishops from all around the Mediterranean had seven major councils to come up with a more organized and well defined belief system which would become the doctrine and orthodoxy of the church. I can just picture this diverse group of around 318 bishops with their different beliefs sitting around the table of a conference room, presenting their ideas, arguing about who is right, all the while under the thumb of the Roman Emperor, who actually attended the council to as he put it “observe” its proceedings, to get something done, to put something on paper. It was at the Council of Nicaea called by Constantine in 325 that the Nicene creed was accepted as the official belief of Christianity, and after continued sometimes murderous arguments finalized at the council of Constantinople in 381. As a consequence other ideas about Jesus became heretical. The doctrine of the Trinity emerged and has been church doctrine ever since: one God in three persons, each of those persons sharing the same essence or substance. The church became institutionalized. So that is the context and a little history about the our triune God. Welcome to Trinity Sunday!

Let's look at today's gospel. It sheds some light on this idea of God in three persons. In it is one of the most quoted of all scripture verses, John 3:16. "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." You see everywhere— bumper stickers, sporting events, on street corners. I have several problems with the interpretation and use of that verse, but we won't get into that today. Rather, I want to focus on Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus leading up to that verse, and especially what Jesus meant when he told Nicodemus "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." What does Jesus mean by that? Nicodemus is a leader of the Pharisees. He is a good man, follows the rules/the laws of the Jews, and he sees something about Jesus that intrigues him, something different about him, something that makes him want to talk to this man who has been healing and preaching and attracting such big crowds. So he seeks out Jesus in the middle of the night, to avoid being seen by his fellow Jews. Part of Nicodemus' problem in understanding Jesus is that he interprets everything literally. When Jesus talks about being born from above, he uses the word "anothen." It is a word that can be interpreted three different ways. It can mean "again," "anew," or "from above." Nicodemus in his unimaginative worldview hears only the first option, "again," and so is confused. "Can one enter into the mother's womb a second time and be born?" Jesus tries to move Nicodemus along, to open him up and help him understand, by introducing the concept of being born of water and Spirit. He tries to lead Nicodemus into letting go of the realm of limited, literal thinking in order to experience the spiritual world, the world of the imagination. He wants him to see that his interaction with God can be transformative rather than simply transactional. It is there that Nicodemus can see the truth and the light and the

life of God. The source of the birth from above that Jesus talks about is the Spirit. Our birth in water is birth in the flesh. The water baptism we receive typically as children demands little conviction or understanding. Until this baptism by water becomes real—until we experience and know the Spirit and Christ within it—there is no real depth to it, at least not to the child who is baptized. The birth from above that Jesus tells Nicodemus about is from the Spirit. It is that new birth that opens our eyes to see God, as Christians to see the Christ Jesus, in every created thing, including in ourselves and one another. The Spirit within us can enlighten us and open us and change our usual understanding of how the world works. Our awareness of the Spirit transforms us to become what we all are, that is expressions of God. Other names for the Spirit are ruach and Shekinah, which is a Hebrew word referring to the “divine feminine.” It literally means dwelling, referring to God’s dwelling among humanity, or “the presence of God in the world.” Jesus says it is like the wind in that it blows where it chooses. We can hear the sound of it but we don’t know where it will go. In other words we can’t control it. What we can do is accept it as God’s offering of God’s presence. You can recognize people who have had this experience. They tend to be loving. They are energetic in their self-giving. They want to serve others, and not just be served themselves. Here is the beauty and the hope: the gift of the Spirit is already given. Even though we often pray “Come Holy Spirit,” The Spirit has already come. It is here. We are all temples of the Spirit. The only difference is the degree of our awareness of it. Poor Nicodemus. He doesn’t get it. But there is hope. Later in John he stands up for Jesus at a meeting of Pharisees at the Sanhedrin, and in the end along with Joseph of Arimathea he helps prepare Jesus for burial. So he seems to get it after all. He seems to have been born anew, this time from above, just as Jesus had told him. It was a transformation that took time to evolve. As it does for most of us, it took a while.

Let's get back to that famous verse John 3:16, where we hear Jesus' words about eternal life. In John's gospel eternal life is more a different quality of life than merely an elongation of life. It is a spiritual quality of life in the here and now, one that transcends the uncertainties and struggles of this physical life we live. It is as much about our life now as anything we may experience after our physical death. It is life in relationship with God and all of God's creation. The trinity itself is all about relationship, love flowing between God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a flowing stream of love and compassion and mercy moving through and in all things. Our union with all of life—all of creation—is realized through our relationship with God the creator, God the Christ present in humanity, and God the Spirit moving throughout all things. These three are one, and we are one with them. That is the triune God, and that is our place within it.

So what can we do to become more aware of the Spirit within us? There are so many ways, but let me suggest one. It is a contemplative form of prayer. Make it a practice to simply sit in silence, maybe 20 or 30 minutes a day, doing nothing but listening for whatever it might be that God wants to communicate to you. Pick a time and a place, maybe first thing in the morning, maybe during the day, perhaps before bed. Inside or outside. You don't have to do or say anything. Just sit and be present. The Spirit, the Shekinah, is there within you and around you, just waiting for you to join her.