

1 Trinity – John 3

Nicodemus was right when he said that Jesus was a teacher who comes from God. But he didn't grasp what he was saying. To say that Jesus comes from God is not simply to say that he is a great and holy teacher. To say that Jesus comes from God is to say that Jesus is God. He is the same substance as the Father, the same Light, the same Lord of Glory, the same eternal and true God. To say that Jesus comes from God is to speak of what no eye can see and no mind can grasp. Nicodemus is speaking of the depth, riches, wisdom, and knowledge of God, whose judgments are unsearchable and whose ways are inscrutable. God is incomprehensible. And his Son who comes from him is the same incomprehensible God, whose judgments are beyond any understanding.

Jesus says that no one has ascended to heaven but the Son of Man. No one has touched the depths of God. No one has seen God. Only the Son, the only begotten of the Father, the true God of God, has seen him. Only the Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, searches the depths of God.

This is why we can't categorize God with our own worldly categories. When we say that God is loving, or just, or good, we can't base any of this on our own understanding of what is loving, just, or good. God is the source of all love. He is love. He is the source of everything just. He is just. He is the source of all good. He is good. We can't see him or his great attributes with our own eyes and minds. Only his Son makes him known. Only his Spirit opens our eyes to see him as he is.

When Nicodemus said that Jesus was a teacher who comes from God, he was right. He concluded this based on the miracles that Jesus had performed, turning water into wine, healing the sick, the lame, and the blind. Nicodemus was right to conclude that Jesus came from God. He even asserted that others knew it as well. "We know that you are a teacher who comes from God." Who is this "we?" Nicodemus was speaking of himself and his fellow Pharisees. Of course, the Pharisees couldn't dispute that Jesus was God's Son. But despite their knowledge of the prophets and the overwhelming witness of Jesus' signs, they stubbornly refused to believe.

Nicodemus clearly recognized that his fellow Pharisees were opposed to Jesus. That's why he came to Jesus by night when no one could see him. Perhaps he thought he could build bridges between Jesus and the Pharisees. Maybe if Jesus knew that they all knew who he was, then they could make peace.

But despite how well meaning Nicodemus was, simply acknowledging that Jesus comes from God isn't enough. As long as you hold onto your preconceived notions about God and what he is like, then it doesn't do you any good if you claim to know who his Son is.

2 Trinity – John 3

Folks imagine they know God just because we can recognize some of his traits. Of course, human nature does have a certain knowledge of God. By nature, we can know that God is almighty. We can know that he is good and just. We can know that he is one and eternal. By nature, we can know that there is some kind of first mover or highest good. But that doesn't mean that we know him personally. It doesn't mean we can probe into his mind and visualize his face and glory.

And yet, people still think they can do this. They only end up creating a god in their own image. They say, "God is love," and they are right to say this. But then they define love according to their own standards and self-serving passions and lusts. They think being good means never telling someone he's wrong. Being just means being on the right side of an argument.

But God cannot be pigeonholed into our own categories. His love, goodness, and justice are beyond human judgments and scrutiny. The Father has loved the Son from eternity. And with this love, he sent him into the flesh, gave him up into death, and raised him from the dead on behalf of all sinners. This is the love only the Holy Spirit can search out and reveal to us. It is the love only the Son has made known to us by loving us and giving himself up for us all.

God's goodness and justice are not based on the popular opinions of this world. He doesn't concern himself with what influential parties think and say, whether it is the Pharisees, earthly rulers, celebrities, or any other influential group in this world. No, God speaks of what he knows, and he bears witness to what he has seen. He knows the heart of everyone. He searches and knows the depths of our sinful minds. He is the judge. He is the supreme source of all good, the Creator of all things both visible and invisible.

When Nicodemus says, "We know that you are a teacher who comes from God," he is right. But he doesn't know what he is saying. You can't know God's Son unless the Father who sent him draws you to him. You can't know God unless his Son make him known and his Spirit opens your heart and mind. Jesus therefore responds to Nicodemus, "I tell you the truth, if anyone isn't born from above, he can't see God's kingdom."

You can't begin to see God – you can't see his love, his goodness, his justice, his mercy, his righteousness, his power, dominion – unless you are first completely reborn. You need to be made a completely new person. Your heart of stone, which is bound to judge everything based on self-serving, earthly standards, must be taken out and replaced with a new heart.

Because he who is born of the flesh is flesh. That is to say, he who is born in the natural way – everyone descended from Adam – is born and conceived in sin, spiritually dead, blind, and under the devil's dominion.

3 Trinity – John 3

Unbelievers are still capable of doing what is outwardly good and fair. Even those who have never heard of the Ten Commandments can recognize the need to believe in a higher power and defend basic virtues like faithfulness to your spouse, parents, companions, and fellow citizens. The problem with unbelievers isn't necessarily that they don't know how to behave. It's that they don't know God. Even the most virtuous people are completely blind and dead before God if they don't know and trust in his Son whom he has sent. They remain flesh, as Jesus says. And like the flowers and grass of the field, all flesh blossoms for a little while and then withers away.

This is how it was for the Pharisees who supposedly knew that Jesus came from God. They knew a lot of stuff. They knew the Scriptures, the promises God made to his people of old, as well as his holy law. They knew not to accept any accusations against someone without the testimony of two or three witnesses. And yet, they refused to believe the testimony of the Father, which he has made about his Son. They insulted the Holy Spirit of God by refusing to believe God's Word. Jesus therefore said to Nicodemus, "We tell what we know, and we testify to what we have seen. But you people don't accept our testimony." Who is the "we" here? It is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is the testimony of God, the source of all truth. No matter how virtuous and morally good the Pharisees seemed to be, they refused to accept the truth of God. And this was at the heart of their wickedness. It is what led them to accept charges against Jesus, which no one could prove. It was the reason the Holy Spirit convicts not only them, but the whole world, of sin. Because they don't believe in Jesus. They don't believe the one who has come forth from God. They don't know God.

This is why you must be born again. You must die to yourself and be made alive again by God.

But how? If I am to be born again, then I need to have some kind of life-altering experience. Yes, that's true. Something must happen to you that utterly changes your life, in fact gives you a new life. Nicodemus wonders how this can be. He sarcastically says that Jesus certainly isn't suggesting that he go back into his mother's womb and then come out again. It's clear that this business of being born again – or born from above – is beyond our comprehension.

But when Jesus explains how someone is born again, he says something surprising, which still jars people to this day. He says, "If anyone isn't born of water and the Spirit, he can't get into God's kingdom."

Nicodemus responds, "How can that be?" How can water do such great things? This is how many Christian groups respond today. Water baptism, they say, can only amount to an

outward sign of our faith and commitment to God. To say that this simple pouring of water and speaking of words causes such an amazing change is, to them, absurd. They respond like Naaman responded when Elisha told him to wash seven times in the Jordan and be cured of his leprosy. Naaman expected a big production. So it is with many who want to be born again. If God is going to bring them through something life-altering, then surely he is going to do something greater than pour water on them and give them his promise.

But that's not how the Holy Spirit works. We don't get to decide how God causes people to be born again based on our own notions of what that looks like. Jesus anticipates this response from Nicodemus and many others who doubt the simple words of the Spirit joined to the washing of water. He knows how Nicodemus will react, which is why he explains the fallen nature of the flesh. Only those who are born of the Spirit can begin to understand and know God. God's Spirit is not bound to our own standards of spirituality. No, he works faith where and when he pleases in those who hear the gospel of God's Son.

If the Holy Spirit chooses to use the simple washing of water with the Word to bring about this faith and newness of life, then who are we to argue with him? You don't know God because of your own supposedly spiritual insights. You didn't contribute anything to your salvation any more than a little child contributes to being born. You didn't come to faith because you managed to peer up into heaven with a mountain top experience. No, the Son of God came down from heaven, was lifted up on the cross for your sins, rose from the dead, and gives you the Spirit of his Father in the preaching of his Word.

Today we observe the feast of the Holy Trinity. God is one eternal God in three eternal persons. How do we know him? It's not by figuring out how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit can each fully be the one true God. This Three in One and One in Three Lord of creation remains incomprehensible to our human reason. But we know him because of what he has revealed and done for us here on earth. The Father who created us, the Son who took on human flesh redeemed us by his blood, and the Holy Spirit who gives us a new birth and new life – this eternal God makes himself known to us through earthly, seemingly meager things – in the flesh of Christ suffering for us in weakness and in his simple promise attached to the washing of water. This is how we know the Son who has come from God from all eternity. This is how we know God. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.