

“Sensible Or Spiritual” John 3:1-7

Trinity Sunday May 27, 2018 @ Hope Lutheran Church

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Nicodemus was a sensible man. He needed to become a spiritual man. Nicodemus is everyman. Nicodemus is you... and me.

Today is **Trinity Sunday, the day of the church year designated to remind us that God’s people are not sensible, but spiritual.** There are many mysteries in our world, but surely none more profound, deep and beyond the scrutiny of human reason than the concept of the great Three-in-One. Our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not three gods, but one. We try to make sense of this...it is like H₂O..three forms, water, ice, steam. If that works for you, fine, but no analogy is adequate. This is a mystery beyond the capacities of sensible people. It is reserved for spiritual people.

Dr. Samuel Johnson once observed, *“Never be afraid to state the obvious. It is what most people have forgotten.”*

This is the principle which will guide our thoughts today. **We who call ourselves believers, people of faith, must appreciate that faith is a matter of the Spirit.** Our relationship with God is a matter of the Spirit. Our sensibilities will forever be in conflict with our faith in God, not to mention our belief in the Holy Trinity. That may be perfectly obvious, perfectly sensible, since matters of God are not subject to scientific pursuit. But it is something we tend to forget.

Perhaps like no other culture in history, our Western world has bought an awful lot of stock in the enterprise of the human intellect. We really respect and honor human brain power, as well we should. God-given intellect has given us comforts and privileges that previous generations could not have imagined. Human intellect proposes to establish a colony of humans on Mars, and not many of us would argue that this impossible. But our scientific age leaves little room for mystery and awe. We pride ourselves in being able to figure things out, in being sensible. It is terribly difficult for us, educated and involved day by day in this culture, to put on the mantle of the mystic and appreciate, even celebrate the world of the Spirit.

On the other hand, it wasn’t easy for Nicodemus either. Even in a very unscientific age, for a man steeped in the traditions of Israel where, for example, on the Day of Atonement the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, performed rituals and cleansing with blood, and left breathing a sigh of relief that he had survived this encounter with the Almighty. It is said that they tied a rope to his ankle so that if he was struck dead in that holy place they could pull him out without risking other lives. Even in such an age, Nicodemus had trouble with the mystical, spiritual language of Jesus.

Nicodemus came with a straight-forward, simple question..” *Teacher, how do I enter the kingdom of God? What do I have to do?* Jesus responds with baffling, out of this world, language. **“You must be born from above.”**

Yes, I know the text says “born again”, and that’s the way Nicodemus hears it, asking a very scientific, sensible question about reentering and reemerging a second time from a woman’s womb. But the chances are very high that he misheard, or misinterpreted Jesus’ statement. The Greek word used here has a double meaning. The primary meaning, listed in any Greek

lexicon, is “*from above*”, from top to bottom . It is the same word used when the curtain in the temple split from top to bottom at the death of Jesus on the cross. Only rarely is the word used to denote a second time. Why did Nicodemus understand the word this way? Because as strange as it sounds to be born twice, it still makes more sense than to be born from above. How is one born of water and the Spirit? What kind of mystical language is this? Who can understand? No one! No more than one can understand why the wind blows here and not there.

Our spiritual life is from above. Our capacity to intersect with the divine is a gift. Our acknowledgement of the great mystery, the three-in-one God, the Holy Trinity, is from above. It is all a gift. God so loved the world that he GAVE his only Son to die on a cross, and whoever receives the gift, believes beyond reason, that this death atones for the sins of the world, whoever puts aside his sensibilities, whoever believes is given life!

Nicodemus hears all this and says, “*I don’t understand.*” And Jesus says, “ Now you are catching on! This is not something one understands. You are never going to understand. You must be born from above. (By the way, the “you” here is plural. Jesus is from South Carolina..” Y ‘all (you ALL) must be born from above.)

A young woman tells of her faith journey. She became a Christian while studying in Spain. She was euphoric in this discovery, and she read everything she could get her hands on about the faith. She committed to memory dozens of Bible passages. She reviewed in her mind all the logical progressions of thought out-lined by Paul in his letters, what we would call systematic theology...all the doctrines we teach in the catechism. All of us sin...we are all guilty..a debt must be paid..Jesus pays the price with his death, not with gold and silver, but his own precious blood.. and the resurrection proves that the payment is adequate. In His life, we all live! She had it all down pat.

Then, she writes, *I somehow got into the habit of dropping into the Spanish cathedrals for the afternoon masses. I’d leave the piercing, dusty light of the streets and go into those cold, echoing churches, sitting for a long time on benches, listening to the mass being chanted. There were tiny women and frail old men scattered like black dabs of paint on rickety benches. You couldn’t tell if you were in the 11th century or the 21st century. The ceiling reached up to the heavens, the altars were of gold and marble, the glory of God pulled me into an infinity of time.. and of no time.. and of all time.. with God. My shallow grasp of the faith dissolved and I fell endlessly into the hands of God.”*

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So what are we saying here? Are we suggesting that catechetical instruction is a waste of time? That the profound, inspired, intellectually demanding insights of St. Paul are of little benefit? That we should simply sit in cold cathedrals, listen to Gregorian chant, and wait to fall into the hands of God? Certainly not! Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. How shall they believe unless there is a preacher, a proclaimer, a teacher? Our faith is rooted in history, in the factual events God’s dealings with Israel, the ministry of the virgin born, God-man, Jesus Christ. This salvation history is received with the mind. But the mind is limited. The processes of the intellect encounter an insurmountable barrier. To breach the

barrier we must be lifted up and above by the Spirit of God. We are born from above by God's indwelling Spirit. We are sensible people but we must become spiritual people, and that only happens by the Spirit.

How else can we **affirm the mind-bending phrases of our creeds?** *“ And the catholic faith is this (from the Athanasian Creed), that we worship one God in three persons, and three persons in One God, neither confusing the persons, nor dividing the substance...”*

There is **one plaguing question in all of this.** Is spirituality simply a means of personal edification? In other words, is this all about me finding peace with God, having some confidence that there is more to this life than grinding out a living and hoping my children will have a better time of it? How does this all interact with the overwhelming challenges of our age and the needs of our community? Is the goal a population of mystics living their lives in the clouds or isolated in cathedrals? Does spirituality mean abandoning the nitty-gritty and deeding the world over to sensible, rational agnostics?

_Let me tell you a story... A professional golfer, well-known for his wild living and rough talking, played a round in a benefit event with President Gerald Ford, Jack Nicklaus, and Billy Graham. Afterwards, another touring pro asked him, *“ What was it like playing with the president and with Billy Graham? “* He responded with a snort of disgust..” *I don't need Billy Graham stuffing religion down my throat!* And with that he stomped off to the practice tee and began pounding golf balls. His friend followed and said, *“ Hey, Rev. Graham must have really been rough on you. What did he say? “* Rather sheepishly, the pro replied, *“well, to tell you the truth he didn't even mention religion.”*

Isn't that fascinating? Billy Graham said nothing about God or Jesus and yet this man perceived that he was “stuffing religion down his throat” . What happened? He sensed himself to be in the presence of the spiritual. He was reminded of the HOLY.. and was convicted by his own unholiness. Maybe he began to take stock of his life. We would hope so.

What I'm saying is that the **life of the Spirit is intensely practical and important in our world.** Dare I say that it is the hope of the world? Can any real peace come to human hearts or to our torn world except by the Spirit? This is our Father's world.

Let us pray for the gift of the Spirit, that we may be born from above. Not many of us can project by our reputation or our presence the spirituality of a Billy Graham, but make no mistake, in our walk and in our talk, in our actions and in our language we can reflect the indwelling power of the Spirit. There is nothing our world needs more.

Lord, we are sensible people. Make us spiritual people. Amen.