

SERMON, TRINITY SUNDAY (Jn 3:1-17)
May 27, 2018, St. Mark's
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Today is Trinity Sunday! We get to celebrate, yes, celebrate the Trinity! The tri-unity of God. The unity of the three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I use the word, "celebrate" with intention. The tri-unity of God is much more than what some might consider an obscure, dry, out-dated doctrine, which if it just disappeared, wouldn't bother us—or our faith in God—in the least.

The traditional image of the Trinity, for some of us taught in Catechism class as youngsters, was the shamrock. For those of you unfamiliar with it, a shamrock is a short clover-like plant with three leaves. God bless Sister John Maura, my fourth grade teacher at Our Lady of Sorrows. "We'll never understand it", she assured us, when she explained the Trinity. I remember thinking that's odd—but if Sister says it's like a shamrock, it must be. Then I filed the Trinity far away in my brain, relieved I didn't have to understand it.

But perhaps there's a different type of image for the Trinity. One that we can get our hearts around. One that we can celebrate. Rather than a static concept, or a 3-leaf shamrock, perhaps we can imagine Trinity as personal relationship--dynamic, ever-moving, ever-flowing relationship. After all, the doctrine of the Trinity is all about the

inner-workings of God. God the Father is in relationship with the Son, who is with the Spirit, who is with the Father.

The Trinity is so much more than a doctrine. It is an action! A vital, life-giving and life-receiving action. Franciscan priest and author, Richard Rohr, describes the action of the Trinity as the divine dance, in his book of the same title. He writes that “[w]hatever is going on in God is a *flow, a radical relatedness, a perfect communion* between Three—a circle dance of love. (Divine Dance, p 27)

It wasn't Richard Rohr who made up this image of the divine dance. It was talked about by the ancient Greek Fathers. They envisioned this dance as an “infinite current of love streaming without ceasing, to and fro, to and fro, to and fro: gliding from the Father to the Son, and back to the Father . . . [creating] a circular current of trinitarian love” continuing 24/7. (Divine Dance, p 27)

We have a beautiful icon of the Holy Trinity here at St. Mark's. It's right up front. The icon depicts God “in the form of the Three: eating and drinking,[at a table] in infinite hospitality and utter enjoyment between themselves.” (Divine Dance, p. 30) “If we take the depiction of God in this icon seriously, we have to say, ‘In the beginning was the Relationship.’” (Divine Dance p 30)

A stunning thing about this icon is what's in front of the dinner table. As you look closely, there appears to be a little rectangular hole painted there. Art historians believe that there was perhaps a mirror glued to the front of the table in the original icon.

What this means is that there was room at the table for a fourth! The observer. You! The Three don't like eating alone. God invites you to share at the divine table. (Divine Dance, p 31)

"This table," in the words of Rohr, "is not reserved exclusively for the Three, nor is the divine circle dance a closed circle: we're all invited in." (Divine Dance, p 31)

How do we join the dance? By being honest, open, and willing.

Let's look at Nicodemus, that delightful character in today's gospel, and his relationship with the Trinity. Was he honest, open, and willing?

It's kind of amazing, really, given his background, that Nicodemus approaches Jesus at all. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, schooled in the deep traditions of the Torah, the first five

books of the Jewish Bible. To a Jew, the Torah was sacred; it contained everything necessary to live a holy life. According to one commentator, “To add one word to [the Torah] or to take one word away was a deadly sin.” (Barclay, p 120-121) The Torah set out the “wide, great and noble principles” by which to live life. (Barclay, p 121) Later Jews, the Scribes, developed thousands of rules and regulations on how each principle was to be applied to every conceivable situation in life. “In other words, they changed the law of the great principles into the legalism of by-laws and regulations.” (Barclay p 121)

The Pharisees were the cream of the crop in Jewish society. In today’s world, we’d call them the elite. “The name, Pharisee, means the Separated One.” (Barclay p 123) They separated themselves from ordinary life in order to keep every detail of the thousands of the scribe’s by-laws and regulations. It was the legalism of the scribes and the pharisees that Jesus railed against.

So when Nicodemus comes to Jesus, he is certainly going against the grain. Jesus is hated by Nicodemus’ colleagues. Yet Nicodemus is honest enough with himself to know that something is lacking in his life. There is something more to life, his heart says. He is open to hearing something new. He’s curious about this Jesus. He is willing to listen to

his heart and approach Jesus. He's willing to step out of his comfort zone—that protective life of the pharisee where every move is determined by rules and regulations.

Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, calls Jesus 'Rabbi', a title of honor, and acknowledges that Jesus comes from God, He tells Jesus “no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answers Nicodemus by saying that it is not the signs and wonders that are important; it is the change in a person's inner life that is important, that change that can only be described as new birth. “No one,” Jesus says, “can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Now, this re-birth that Jesus speaks of is not a new concept for Nicodemus. A scripture scholar, Nicodemus certainly knew of the Hebrew prophets such as Ezekiel “who spoke about the new heart that must be created in man.” (Barclay p 131) Indeed, “again and again, the prophets had spoken of the very experience Jesus spoke of.” (Barclay p 131)

Yet Nicodemus resists Jesus' teaching, not because being born anew was unfamiliar territory, but as one commentator suggests, perhaps Nicodemus wasn't willing to be changed.

How often do we resist for the same reason? “No, thank you,” we say to the Trinity when beckoned into the dance. “I’m satisfied with myself the way I am.” Or, if we’re able to see that perhaps some things in us do need to change, we say, “I can figure this out myself, Trinity; I don’t need your help.”

In his opposition to changing, Nicodemus feigns ignorance, saying in essence, that he can’t understand how this re-birth would work. “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” he asks. Jesus responds by reminding him that the wind (the Greek and Hebrew words for spirit also mean wind) blows where it chooses. “You hear the sound of it,” Jesus says, “but you don’t know where it comes from or where it’s going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” In other words, you don’t have to understand how the re-birth works, how the Spirit changes you; just know that it does.

Ah, but there’s a condition for re-birth. We have to be honest, open, and willing.

There are risks. We’ll have to admit our own powerlessness. We’ll have to believe that God can do for us what we can’t do for ourselves. We’ll have to humbly ask God to remove our negative habits, ways of being that are deeply ingrained—that is, we’ll have to change. Some of us church-goers can get used to our ways of doing things. For

some of us, religion can become routine: like coming to Sunday Eucharist and forgetting about God the rest of the week. (Feasting on Word, p 46)

Yet God is patient with us, and with Nicodemus. Our pharisee friend actually comes a long way in John's gospel. By the end of John, (7:45-52), he is no longer afraid to be identified as a follower of Jesus—"he 'comes out' in identifying himself with Christ by providing spices to embalm Jesus' body." (Feasting, p 48)

Are you willing to change? Will you take the risk of accepting God's invitation to be in personal relationship with the Trinity? That dynamic, ever-moving, ever-flowing relationship of love. Will you join the dance?

Sources:

William Barclay, *The Gospel of St. John*, Vol. 1, Revised Ed., 1975

David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 2009

Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*, 2016