

FOR GOD SO LOVED

JOHN 3:1-17
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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Last Sunday was Pentecost Sunday. The day the church celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the birth of the church.

I remarked that we don't always find it easy to talk about the Holy Spirit as Anabaptists.

Today is Trinity Sunday and our focus is, obviously on the Trinity—a subject that *all* Christians, Anabaptist or otherwise, struggle to conceptualize.

We gladly *confess* that God is three in one and one in three. But when it comes to *explaining it*, or coming to clear conceptions of how it all works, well, things get a bit fuzzy.

The math doesn't work. Three is not one. One is not three.

I'm afraid that I will have to disappoint you at the outset of this sermon. I will not be unraveling all the mysteries of the Trinity today. I've never been much good at ordinary math, much less *Trinitarian* math!

But I am hoping to say at least a few useful things about this deep mystery that is at the heart of the Christian faith.

To begin with, the word "Trinity" is never mentioned in the bible. Not once. The three-in-oneness of God is never explicitly described or stated in Scripture in the way that other important doctrines might be.

Christian convictions about the Trinity are, rather, a *response* to God's self-disclosure over time.

Earlier in the story, God reveals Godself as Creator, as Father, as King, as Lawgiver, as Yahweh, the great “I Am.”

The ancient Hebrews were insistent that there was *one God* that was the source of all that existed, not many, as some of the neighbouring nations believed. There is no more foundational truth for the Jewish people than that God is one.

It’s right there in the first commandment. *You shall have no other gods before me* (Ex. 20:3). It’s in the *shema*, recited by faithful Jews every day, taken from Deuteronomy 6:4:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

God is one. Simple.

And then came Jesus, and people’s conceptions of God had to change to accommodate the Son. All of a sudden Jesus was claiming to be and to do what only Yahweh could be and do. All of a sudden Jesus was saying things like, “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9) and “I and the father are one” (John 10:30).

And then, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to indwell and sustain and enliven his church, and people’s conceptions of God once again had to change to accommodate this new manner of divine disclosure, this new way in which God revealed Godself.

The Trinity describes the progressive revelation of God. It describes human beings attempts to be faithful *to* and to keep up *with* the God who is always out in front of us.

Whatever else the idea of God as “Trinity” reveals about God’s nature and purposes for the world, it seems to me that at the *very least*, it describes a God that we *could* never and *would* never have come up with on our own!

This week I was listening to a podcast where an atheist philosopher of science was discussing her encounter with a twelve-step addictions program.

She was desperate to overcome her addiction, but she really resisted the whole “admit your helplessness and turn yourself over to a higher power” stage.

She was too intelligent for God, she knew that it was all a bunch of imaginative fantasy, but she also knew that this stage of the process was non-negotiable if she wanted to be part of the program.

She was relieved to discover that the program allowed her to pray to a higher power, ***as she understood him or it.***

So, the higher power that she constructed in her head was of an exalted version of her best self. It was the voice of the self that she wanted to be, that she admired, that was healthy and in control of her life.

It was a voice that called her to be a better person, that didn't intervene or interfere in her personal life, that was more or less a cheerleader on the sidelines as she pursued her own goals for her own reasons.

As I listened to this interview, and as I thought about this popular idea of embracing "a God of our own choosing," I thought that **as Christians this is precisely what we do *not* have.**

Anyone can think up a God who more or less conforms to human expectations, who more or less reflects human assumptions of power and knowledge and morality.

But who would come up with a God who is known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?!

Who would come up with three-in-one and one-in-three?

For the remainder of the sermon, I'm going to look at the Trinity through the lens of an encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus.

This story does not explain the Trinity. But it does give us a glimpse into the Trinity in action.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. He wants to know more about this Jesus, but he wants to do it in secret. He's a Pharisee, after all, and his colleagues have little use for this troublemaker.

He begins by flattering him. *You must be from God, he says, for how else could you do what you are doing?*

Jesus, as he so often does, seems to change the subject. He begins to talk about the kingdom of God—what every good Jew was hoping for—and about being *born again* or *born from above* or *born anew*, depending on your translation.

Nicodemus seems willfully obtuse in his response. *What, am I supposed to reenter the womb? How can someone be born again?*

Jesus is, of course, speaking metaphorically. He's speaking of being born again *spiritually*. He is speaking of baptism and a Spirit that blows and brings life wherever it wills.

And then, he begins to talk about his own future. He talks about the Son being “lifted up,” referring both to his crucifixion and his glorification, and about how the one who believes in him will have eternal life.

Finally, at the conclusion of this morning's text, he speaks the words that many of us have known since we were little kids:

6 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him

For God so loved

Whatever else we might want to say about the Trinity on this Trinity Sunday, we must start and end with love.

Before a world was ever created, there was love and community and *relationship* at the heart of the life of God.

And then, out of this fullness, a beautiful world is created. A beautiful world that takes a bad turn through the sin and rebellion of human beings.

But it is love that refuses to give up on distorted image bearers and marred creation.

The one God—**Father**, Creator, Lawgiver, King— this one God *loves* the world and this love is expressed through the gift of the Son for the salvation of the world.

The Son shows the love of God to the world, to the point of dying on our behalf.

The Spirit is the response of the love that the Father and the Son have for one another and for us... Not wanting to leave us as orphans (John 14:18)... Giving the gift of God's presence in the absence of the physical Jesus, and helping us to live in the way that the Son taught us to.

Father, Son, Spirit. And at the heart of this one God is love.

One commentator summarized the Trinity like this.

To say that God is Trinity is simply to say that God exists, eternally, as a community of love.¹

So all three members of the Trinity are referred to in his brief encounter with Nicodemus. And all three are at work:

1. the Father, whose kingdom Jesus announces and inaugurates
2. the Son who is given by the Father, who is lifted up so that the all may have eternal life
3. the Spirit who breathes new life and second birth for those who will believe

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the dark to scope him out, to see if this strange teacher really might come from the one God that he (thinks) he knows so well.

And Jesus upends all of his categories about who God is and how God works and what God requires.

He shows him a God who is love, whose Spirit is on the move, who will act in Jesus in ways that nobody could ever have imagined, and who invites all people into new birth.

¹ <http://myunquietheart.blogspot.ca/2014/01/the-doctrine-of-trinity-in-800-words.html?m=1>

Nicodemus got far more than he bargained for in this nocturnal conversation. He got a window into the very nature of God!

It's interesting to track the character of Nicodemus throughout the rest of John's gospel.

He appears two more times.

The first time is John 7. The context is that division about Jesus and his identity, between the people and the Jewish religious leaders. There is confusion about his enigmatic teaching, there have been attempts to arrest him.

The Pharisees say to the temple police, "Why haven't you arrested him?" They replied, "Nobody speaks like this man!" (7:46). The Pharisees appeal to their own authority... Have any of *us* believed in him? In other words, "has anyone *important* or *smart* or *influential* believed in this Jesus?! It's only the *crowd* who don't understand the law who believe!"

In this context, Nicodemus interjects: "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" (7:51). This suggestion is met with a rather terse response from the other Pharisees—"no prophet can come from Galilee!"

The second time we meet Nicodemus comes immediately after Jesus' crucifixion in John 19. Joseph of Arimathea—a "secret disciple of Jesus" has taken the body for burial.

Here, all we read of Nicodemus is that he came with Joseph, "bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds"(John 19:39).

Joseph and Nicodemus prepare and wrap the body, and lay it in a tomb.

And so, Nicodemus sort of hovers around the periphery of the story of Jesus. He's curious, but he comes in the dark to the one who is light and life.

He's impressed by Jesus' signs, but baffled by his words about being born anew. *How can these things be?*

Later, he offers halfhearted resistance to the Pharisees' increasingly desperate attempts to have Jesus silenced, arrested, and disposed of.

And he's there at the end—or what he *thinks* is the end—showing reverence and honour to this enigmatic and divisive figure that he could never quite figure out, could never quite give himself to entirely.

That's the last we hear of him.

We don't know if Nicodemus went on to become a devoted follower of Jesus or if he resumed his life as a Pharisee, a manager of God.

We don't know if he ever gave himself to Jesus entirely, if he ever allowed the Spirit to breathe new life into him.

Here on this Trinity Sunday 2015, I think the greatest shame of all would be if we, like Nicodemus, would remain on the periphery of Jesus and his offer of new life

If we would allow our doubts or our fears or our pride or our confusion about how the Trinity works or our discomfort of mysteries that transcend our rational understandings or *any* other thing to keep us away from embracing God's gift of love and his offer of new life.

Jesus always makes things uncomfortably personal.

When people—like Nicodemus and many others in the gospels—come to him with abstract questions about God or eternal life or whether or not he was Israel's chosen one, it's remarkable how frequently the conversation ends up being turned back on the one asking the questions.

It's remarkable how often those seeking answers from Jesus end up being the ones who Jesus explicitly or implicitly is asking questions of.

Jesus does not leave us with abstract questions. He wants us to choose. *Who do you say that I am?*

Nicodemus is left scratching his head after this encounter, and perhaps we are too, after hearing it this morning. Jesus sometimes seems so elusive in his responses.

But in the end, Jesus makes one thing very simple for Nicodemus and for us who encounter this story all these years later.

For God so loved the world...

There is much that is difficult to understand about God and how God works, but the clearest thing that Jesus ever reveals to us about God's nature is that God is love.

And because of this love, God sent his Son into the world that those who believe in him would not perish but have eternal life.

God wants to save and not condemn the world he loves.

Whether we have been following Jesus for long years or whether we are truly considering his words for the first time this morning, I pray that we would be a people who heed his call to come, to believe, to be born anew, and to receive the life that he offers to all.

Amen.

