

5.26.2024 The Holy Trinity

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Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

“Growing older is always new”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The first Sunday after Pentecost is always Holy Trinity, a day we meditate upon the mystery of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet it might also come as a surprise that the word “trinity” isn’t in the Bible; rather, it is Jesus who witnesses to the triune God, calling God the Father, himself the Son, and promising to send the Holy Spirit. The Holy Trinity is the very center of the gospel message: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.*”

As modern Christians, we easily say things like God is “one in three and three in one.” Today’s gathering hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty,” contains the words, “God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” Though we easily speak of three persons in unity with one another, we may also be surprised that early Christians struggled to express this.

For example, the second century church father, Theophilus of Antioch, attempted to express the triune God with the Greek word *trias* or “triad,” writing that God is “God, Logos and Sophia,” meaning “God, Word and Wisdom.” Though Theophilus expressed three persons, he did not fully express the unity of one God. It was a North African church father named Tertullian who first used the word we translate as “trinity.” Tertullian used the Latin word *trinitas* to describe the mystery of one God in unity of substance, expressed in three persons – the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit.

Both the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds confess God’s triune identity witnessing to three persons in one God. However, it was finally another church father from Cappadocia named, Basil the Great, who defined with precision, vocabulary about the triune God that we still use today. Basil wrote that God is “*mia ousian, treis hypostaseis*, meaning God is “one substance, in three persons.” To this day we express the divine mystery as “one in three and three in one.”

Yet this history, while it’s crucial to understanding of the Doctrine of the Trinity, it is certainly not a substitute for living into the reality of the triune name in which we are baptized. In today’s gospel, it is this divine reality into which Jesus is attempting to lead Nicodemus. Jesus didn’t explain a doctrine; rather, he revealed the reality of God to Nicodemus.

We know the story well: Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to hear more about God.

Nicodemus, perhaps a bit nervous, began by flattering Jesus saying, “*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.*” Ignoring the flattery, Jesus went straight to the heart of the matter, saying, “*No one can see the kingdom of God – no one can know God, no one can walk with God – without being born from above.*” This birth, by grace through faith, brings us into life with God.

According to Jesus, life with God is not about book learning or memorizing scripture; it is about being born of water and the Spirit from above. Life with God is a spiritual journey. It is something that we both do and become. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that no matter how old or how learned he would become, he must first be born of the Spirit. Eternal life begins now, and as we grow older, we are always being made anew.

Totally confused, Nicodemus replied, “*How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?*” The birth that Jesus is leading Nicodemus into is a birth that must be lived out over one’s entire lifetime. We might say that as we grow older, we are always becoming God’s new creation again and again, as the Holy Spirit give us new birth from above. Jesus is talking about an authentic inner experience that helps us live in the everyday messiness of our lives. Life in the Spirit is not an escape from the world’s problems, it is the power to overcome them.

Again today, as we gathered, the Holy Spirit kite has helped us see what is always taking place in our lives: the Spirit always going before and above us, always lifting us to heavenly things. Like Nicodemus, we might also ask Jesus, “*How can these things be?*” To which Jesus might also respond to us, “*Are you Christians, and yet you do not understand these things?*” Being born of water and the Spirit, living out your baptism in the triune name means letting that name dwell in you, allowing the Spirit to blow where it chooses in your life. Life with God is about discerning the Spirit blowing in our lives and in our church.

Jesus’ words, “*The wind blows where it chooses,*” remind us that together as a church the Spirit is always seeking to lift, lead, and birth us anew. This congregation is 165 years old and is always being made new in the Spirit. St. Mark’s has had many chapters in its life, and we are St. Mark’s in this present chapter. The Spirit is always blowing and leading, recreating and challenging us to a grasp a renewed vision for mission. We are Christ’s body in this place. Like generations before us, how is the Spirit leading and birthing us into a future that we may not live to see?

Holy Trinity Sunday is not simply a festival about a doctrine or a concept, it is a call to live into the triune name of God, allowing the Spirit to recreate us again for a new life chapter.

All of us have undergone personal reinvention throughout our lives. Whether it was moving from childhood into being a teenager, or from a being young adult into the identity of a spouse or a parent. To be successful in each chapter of our lives means reinventing ourselves as we go to a new school, begin a new job, become a parent, gain mastery in another language, move to a new city or country, or rediscover who I am in that life chapter named “retirement.”

Like corporations who pay consultants to help reinvent and rebrand themselves so they might remain competitive in the world, the Holy Spirit is always seeking to recreate us – always seeking to give us new birth us as a church, reinventing us, so that born anew, we might give new witness to the “old, old story” in a world always changing. Yet many churches and Christians attempt to do ministry as if they were driving by looking through the rearview mirror, always wishing they could return to the past, rather than looking forward through the windshield, following where the Spirit is leading.

On Holy Trinity Sunday, we hear the familiar old story that, in Jesus, God so loves the world. Are we listening and watching for the Spirit to lift and lead us? “Do not be astonished that I say to you, you must be born from above, that you must be made new to tell this story anew.”

At the end of John’s gospel, Nicodemus reappears with Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus. Led forward in his life by the Spirit, Nicodemus had walked into the light. Like Nicodemus, the Spirit is always leading us forward in our lives, continuing to renew us to live for Christ.

How is the Spirit renewing you? How is the Spirit renewing us as a congregation to be a place of light and hope for all people – for this world God so loves?

In the words of the Isaiah today may we all respond, “Here am I, send me. O Lord, let me live all my life for you.”

With the Spirit, growing older is always new. Amen.