

Nativity Lutheran Church
Palm Beach Gardens, FL
May 27, 2018

Pentecost 1 / The Holy Trinity
The Holy Gospel: St. John 3:1-17
Theme: By the Spirit's Power

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1Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." 3Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

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In Nomine Jesu

"The Holy Trinity" ... the name of today's special focus in the Church Year. Nothing special, I guess, since it comes on the first Sunday after Pentecost every year. It is, however, special for us for a really simple reason.

It's special because it's the only day in our whole church year that is devoted to a doctrine – a fundamental teaching – of the Christian faith. And in this case, the teaching is pretty simple to state but virtually impossible to comprehend. God is one being, but God is three persons ... Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Just that simple. Just that incomprehensible.

With all this talk about the Holy Trinity ... Father, Son, **and** Spirit ... we're confronted with a rather unexpected kind of text. We've got a text in today's Holy Gospel that's really about the Holy Spirit. About, in particular, the Holy Spirit encountering an early disciple of Jesus by the name of Nicodemus. It's a

text about a weird, Spirit-filled night that changed his life. And it's a text where the Holy Spirit encounters us as well. Encounters us, like him, in all our questioning, skeptical selves.

The Spirit. God's Spirit, just like the wind, is unpredictable and uncontrollable. Just ask any weather forecaster – though they're getting better at it. [Especially when bringing us bad news for a holiday weekend and when it's going to rain on us, right?]

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And yet the Bible teaches us that it is this same unpredictable and uncontrollable Spirit that brings about new life. The Spirit of God, as Nicodemus hears from Jesus, casts away the old and puts in place a new order – an order that is outside the realms of human control. In other words, if you're a "control freak," watch out!

There's a great story about the heavenly Trinity speaking together about their need for a vacation. God the Father was heard to say that he wanted to go to what he thought was one of his best gifts to the world ... the ocean coast of the Pacific Northwest in the United States. Jesus, however, commented that the folks in the Middle East ... especially Israelis and Palestinians ... still hadn't figured out that peace was his gift to them, so he was heading there. Then they asked the Holy Spirit about the vacation destination. "I'm going to see some folk who aren't very familiar with me. I think I'm going to visit some Lutheran congregations."

That might generate a chuckle, but I suspect it does that only because there's an embarrassing level of discomfort in talking too much about the Holy Spirit in all too many Lutheran congregations. What is there, I wonder, about God's Spirit that makes us so uneasy?

In stark contrast to our Lutheran habit, however, some Christian folk seem to think that they have a monopoly over God's Spirit. In many traditions, one of the signs of a "true" believer is how many of the biblical gifts of the Holy Spirit a person has. And for many an even greater sign is when one has the gift of speaking in tongues. And my hunch is that if you've ever had an extended conversation with someone from those traditions, you've talked about the Holy Spirit and about its absence in "your" life and "your" church ... at least from their

point of view. It'll be worth our time to pay close attention to today's text if that situation is at all familiar ... or interesting ... to you.

In our text, the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus unfolds in an interesting but puzzling fashion. These two men, both of whom are teachers, meet to discuss kingdom business. And it's clear from the "get-go" that the two are not on the same page. Nicodemus is stuck at the literal or the physical level of life. I guess, to a certain degree, that's where he needs to be. The old Nicodemus, the one who had not confessed his belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, must really die, and give birth to a new way of life. And this new way of life is governed by God's Spirit.

And even though Nicodemus was a wise and presumably good man, he still seems to be baffled by the meaning of all that Jesus had to say to him. As an intellectual, as a man who appreciates a good explanation when he hears one, he's seeking from Jesus something that's logical and tangible. But Jesus insists that life in the kingdom of God is not logical. Being born from above means that one's life is uncontrolled. It's like the unpredictability of the wind.

And it's right here that the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, steps in. Being born of the Spirit is the only way of entering the kingdom of God. That's exactly what Jesus said. In this kingdom, things are not the same as they are in the kingdoms of the world. Being born from above is a summons to Nicodemus – and to us – to be willing to live with the unscientific, non-empirical, illogical way of life that the Spirit of God produces for those who live as part of God's kingdom.

And for Nicodemus, as for so many of us, this uncontrollable, unpredictable Spirit of God might just come into our lives and upset our priorities. Who knows?!

- This Spirit might just come as the wind and sweep away the hatred and prejudice and even our fear of change and surprises ... stuff that so many of us harbor deep within.
- This Spirit might just come as the dew and refresh us – give us a new worldview, a new way of thinking about things politically, economically, and socially – a way more similar to the way of the ones from whom the Holy Spirit proceeds ... the Father and the Son.

- The Holy Spirit might just come as the fire and cause a great burning within – a renewal of our personal faith, a greater sense of urgency to heed the message of the gospel.

Well, later on in this same chapter of John, we're told that the Holy Spirit is upon Jesus without limit or measure. And I think the same is true for those who are born from above and who are born of the Spirit ... that's us, by the way. To a certain degree, Nicodemus' insistence upon a literal rebirth was true. Page | 4

Being born of the Spirit means receiving the Holy Spirit without limit or measure into one's life. There are those who, like Nicodemus, for whatever reason, aren't quite prepared to receive such a gift.

Maybe some of us are afraid of what will happen if the Holy Spirit is really present in our lives. Maybe we're afraid of being born of the Spirit ... so fully. If it means losing control of our lives and giving them up and over to God ... and it does ... that's scary for most of us.

There's a worship book in which the opening prayer for Trinity Sunday indicates that the Holy Spirit has the power to cleanse us – to rid us of what is wrong, to remove from our lives those things that cause us to be separated from God and our brothers and sisters.

That same prayer also denotes that the Holy Spirit burns, convicts, and converts ... and quite frankly some of us do not want those things happening to us! A burning, a conviction, or a conversion could be too much for some of us to handle. It could cause our lives to be turned upside down ... which, in the mystery of God's plan, is right-side up.

So maybe that's why God made it so clear in another – very special – verse of our text. That's the one that reminds us that in Jesus ... in his suffering, death, and resurrection ... it is God who turns lives right side up. I think you know the words ... maybe you've known them since childhood:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

And it's the Holy Spirit ... in sometimes much less fiery and dramatic ways, who makes that gift our own.

For us ...at least for most in the water's of Baptism ... is when that "right-side up" life is given. *By the Spirit's power, not by our own.*

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Each time a simple word of forgiveness is offered to us whose hearts are torn by our guilt and sin and lovelessness, that "right-side up" life is restored. *By the Spirit's power, not by our own.*

It happens quietly, but powerfully, in every liturgy we come here to join, in every word of grace we hear read from God's word, in every proclamation we hear that touches our torn and upside down lives with the healing and life-giving word of God's grace ... grace that restores us again to "right-side up" living. And it happens in every opportunity we take to receive God's gifts of grace in the Body and Blood of Jesus in Holy Communion.

But watch out! It's a word with the power of the Holy Spirit! Unpredictable. Uncontrollable. When you hear it ... on Sunday's from one in the formal role of pastoral leader or in all the other days of the week when we touch one another's lives in our ministries in our daily walk with Jesus ... watch out. It's the Spirit of God that's at work!

And like the wind, blowing in all of the world not announcing where from or where to it's going, that Spirit will lead your "right-side-up" lives to be and become more than you ever thought possible or even imagined. That's your life as Christ's servants and disciples in the world that God loved so much. How much? So much that he sent his Son to give us and all who believe eternal life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit!

AMEN!

Soli Deo Gloria