

## **Holy Trinity Sunday with Deaconess Pam Harrington**

### **Message – “Asking Questions with Nicodemus”**

I have been watching a series on Youtube with my mother. She heard about it on a religious show she watches, and she asked me to find it for her because she is 86 and a little afraid of technology and really didn't know what Youtube was. But we got her Firestick out and I showed her how to access Youtube and there it was--“The Chosen”. Maybe you've heard of it.

It's described as “the first ever multi-season series about the life of Christ”. It's pretty good. It's entertaining, and although it is filmed in Texas and Utah, it looks like it is set in Israel. The religious consultants they are using have helped to make it true to the scriptural setting—the culture and history of Jesus' day. I'd recommend it if you are interested in watching something a little different than your usual fare on Netflix or cable TV.

One of the main characters in Season One of “The Chosen” is Nicodemus, the same Nicodemus who is featured in our gospel lesson today. In the TV series we see Jesus through the eyes of Nicodemus, and we get a glimpse of the surprise and consternation Jesus caused for the people of his day. For people like Nicodemus, Jesus turned the world upside down and challenged the rules of his faith and the very core of his beliefs.

Nicodemus was an educated Jew, a leader and a member of the Sanhedrin, the religious court of the Jews centred in Jerusalem. As such, he was charged with upholding the Laws of Moses, overseeing the religious observances of the people, and ferreting out any who might be sinners and blasphemers. He was a Pharisee, a group that the Gospel of John most definitely associates with opposition to Jesus. But apparently Nicodemus was not interested in bringing charges against Jesus, rather, he wanted to know more! Nicodemus was a rabbi with a curious

mind, and when he saw Jesus teaching and healing in God's name, he asked for a one-on-one interview with him. Mind you, he came to Jesus at night, so that he could be open and honest and ask questions without being seen as supporting Jesus.

Nicodemus was not yet interested in wearing a team jersey. He wanted to wait and see where Jesus was going with his message before he put his support behind Jesus.

Nevertheless, Nicodemus was a seeker. The questions he asked were not intended to trick Jesus or catch him in breaking the law, like the questions the other Pharisees asked. Nicodemus showed genuine respect for Jesus' miracles and his teaching. Later, when the other Pharisees wanted to arrest Jesus because of the surprising things he said, and without investigating his many miracles and the good works he was doing, Nicodemus came to his defense, saying, "Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?" In other words, do a proper investigation and see if what he is saying has merit! We don't see Nicodemus again in John's gospel until the very end when Nicodemus, showing his true colours at last, brings costly spices to the burial of Jesus to anoint his body.

Our gospel story today shows Nicodemus and Jesus having a lengthy theological discussion about the function of the Spirit of God. Jesus spoke to Nicodemus of being "born from above" or being "born again". Nicodemus was a little confused and perhaps a little annoyed, taking Jesus literally. He said, "I'm a grown man, Jesus. I can't come out of my mother's womb again and start all over. I can't be born again!"

But Jesus said, "Nicodemus, the Spirit is like the wind. You do not know where it has come from and you do not know where it is going. And Nicodemus...so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. God can change you simply by an act of grace. There is no

reason for it having happened and there is no explanation for its continuance. You cannot hear the wind; you cannot map its journey. This man, that woman, this old man, this young child will be fundamentally changed when the Spirit of God comes into their hearts.”

Obviously, Jesus was not talking about a natural birth. As he explained to Nicodemus, he was talking about a spiritual birth, a birth that was supernatural. Some Christians talk about being “born again” as a spiritual conversion—an instant in time when a life is turned around, through prayer or healing. When we Lutherans talk about being born of the Spirit, we are usually referring to baptism. That is usually the first marker in our spiritual journey with God, the first time we are introduced to the Holy Spirit, and in fact, are filled with the Holy Spirit. In baptism God comes into our lives, claiming us as one of God’s own children through a spiritual adoption process.

**How** God comes to us in baptism, and **what exactly the Holy Spirit does**, is a mystery to us—in the same way the concept of the Trinity is a mystery to us. Today, as you know, we celebrate the Sunday of the Holy Trinity. We know that the church teaches us that God is three persons in one, and we have knowledge of God as acting in three different ways:

God the Father- the God who made us and gave us our first birth.

God the Son - who was human like us, and yet by becoming one with

us, and dying a death like us, is able to raise us to new

life.

God the Holy Spirit - who lives and works in us and gives us our second

birth, our “supernatural” birth.

We know from scripture that God’s Holy Spirit is the bringer of visions and dreams, the source of strength and hope, the supplier of healing words. God’s Holy Spirit prays with us and for us when we do not have the words to pray. This is the God who is wind, who is breath, who is in the very air we breathe; God the transformer, the one who gives new birth, new life, who calls to us, works through us, and resides in us. This is the God that Jesus described to Nicodemus.

As Jesus taught Nicodemus, we are taught that the Spirit comes into our lives and makes changes. We are never too old or too entrenched to be changed by the Spirit of God. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can become whatever is in the mind of God for us to become.

The Spirit of God can change the world. It is that powerful. Jesus taught this. Nicodemus learned this. And we the baptized have come to know this to be true. When people like us allow the Spirit to lead us, we leave behind our own feelings of unworthiness, of being powerless. We leave behind our feelings of fear, our dread for being hurt or conned or exploited by others. We leave behind our selfishness—our desire to do only those things which have a direct benefit to us and our own. We leave behind our greed to build bigger piles of “things” to mark our success and fill our lives with pleasure and comfort. With the urging of the Spirit, we instead look for ways to act out God’s love towards others, to be the living Christ for people who need Christ in their lives. For as St. Paul tells us, when the Spirit breathes new life in us, it is no longer we who live, but Christ, who lives in us.

Perhaps you don't feel particularly close to God right now. I have times like that. It has been a difficult year, a year of fear and monotony. Fear of Covid, fear of isolation and loneliness. A year of weariness, from days that seem endless, dull and the same. We have been in exile from in-person church, and a bit like the people of Israel, lost in Babylon and cut off from the Temple. Perhaps God feels very far away to you. Or maybe you have seen things that confuse and concern you—like Nicodemus did when he witnessed Jesus healing and teaching in God's name. Your spirit may be troubled or doubting...or seeking answers. It's good to ask questions, like Nicodemus did. And perhaps it's also wise to ask questions of yourself...

***What are the changes that you need in your life? What are the things you need to let go of, to leave behind? What would you ask the Spirit to pray for you? Where is the Spirit leading you?***

Take time to be quiet and listen...the Spirit is like the wind, blowing softly, the very breath of God, breathing life into us.

Amen.