

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” ³ In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” ⁴ “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” ⁵ Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” ⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ “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. (John 3:1-17)

Saved by the Trinity!

Why did you come to church today? Many of us, especially our guests this morning, are here because of the graduations that we will celebrate in a few minutes. That’s a good thing. Even if you’re a member, you may have come to church today simply because it’s Sunday and that’s what you usually do. But there is another reason to come today. That reason underlines everything that we have tried to do in the lives of the children who are graduating today. This is Trinity Sunday. It’s the day when we celebrate the most distinctive teaching in the Christian church: the teaching that we worship one God in three persons. Now, that is not an easy teaching. I have large volumes in my library about that doctrine. Much ink has been spilled over the last two thousand years trying to explain that doctrine and defend it from false ideas. Many different illustrations have been used to explain it – a clover with three leaves, a triangle with its three sides and so on. But all those illustrations come up short. They can actually create more confusion than they solve. This morning, let’s go in a different direction. As we consider Jesus’ words to Nicodemus in John chapter three, we see a surprising truth: this most difficult and confusing doctrine is above all else a practical doctrine. How I can say that? Because that three in one God reveals himself for one purpose: to bring us to heaven. **We are saved by the Trinity!**

I.

Nicodemus, a teacher and ruler of the Jewish people, came to see Jesus at night. In the course of their conversation, Jesus made some of the most famous statements in the Bible. Maybe it didn’t seem to you like he was talking about the Trinity per se. But he was. Jesus moved from person to person and described how each worked for our good. We want to start in the obvious place this morning: the Father. **We are saved by the Trinity! The Father loved us.**

This chapter contains the single most famous passage in all of Scripture: John 3:16, **“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.”** God loved the world. As is true so many times in Scripture, “God” here refers specifically to the Father. The Father loved the world. The Greek word used for “love” here doesn’t mean romantic love. It doesn’t mean some kind of dreamy emotion. It means the kind of love that sees you for what you really are and chooses to love you anyway. It means the kind of love that always works for your good, that never hesitates to sacrifice to fulfill your needs. God loved us like that.

And not just us. Not just believers. Not just people who try to live good lives. God loved the world. He loved every single human being that ever has been born or ever will be born. And he didn’t love us because we deserved it. Far from it. If he gave us what we deserve, he would send us all to hell forever, because we are all

sinners. God knows that better than anyone because God knows all things. He knows our secret sins, the things that we would do almost anything to keep from getting out. God knows the innermost recesses of our hearts. He knows the pride that lives there, the pride that thinks that we're basically good people. We don't sell crack to kids. We don't beat or abuse our children. We're the good guys – at least that's what we keep telling ourselves. But that pride is sin all by itself. And it is a lie. Maybe it's true that we don't sell drugs to school kids. Maybe it's even true that we don't abuse our children, but we are sinners from the first moment that we exist in our mother's wombs. We are selfish. We make all things about us. We don't want to listen to others. We don't want to put ourselves out to support others. We don't like it when legitimate authorities tell us to do things that are totally within their power to require. It makes us angry, because we want to do something different – or because we just don't want to be told what to do. We are prideful sinners by birth and we spend our whole lives worshipping ourselves as gods.

That sin deserves God's punishment in hell forever. But God so loved the world – he made no distinction between us and child molesters. He loves us all. That may gall the pride in our hearts. We may not like being lumped in with people who are guilty of so much more than we think we could ever be guilty of. But God does that. He loves us and them the same. He loves us even when our pride is offended that he would love us like he loves “real sinners.” And he gave his one and only Son to pay for the sins of the entire world. Jesus died for all those child molesters out there. Jesus died for racists and murderers. Jesus died for the people who made my life difficult yesterday and for the people who I have trouble forgiving today. Jesus died and he paid for all people everywhere. That means he died and he paid for me. He paid for the pride that thinks I'm better than those other sinners. He paid for all that I am guilty of.

And the Father sent him to do all that. He gave his one and only Son. In older translations of the Bible, this phrase was often rendered, “He gave his only begotten Son.” And there's a technical discussion about what the proper translation of this one Greek word should be and I won't bore you with it this morning. But the word John uses here teaches the unique relationship between the Father and the Son. John often calls us the children of God. But he never uses this Greek word for us. He reserves it for Jesus. This word underlines the special love he has for his only begotten Son. That's who the Father sacrificed for us. Martin Luther said, “He gave his dearest treasure.” The Father loved us so much that he planned our rescue before he created the world. He sent the Son that he loves to lay down his life so that we are free. That sending and that love lie at the heart of the teaching about the Trinity.

II.

What could be more practical than the eternal love of God for us? When it comes to faith, we often think that practical means rules for how to live. But God goes deeper than rules. What we need every day is comfort and strength. What we need to live for him is a faith that clings to him. That's what the doctrine of the Trinity gives us. **We are saved by the Trinity. The Son came for us.**

Jesus is the Son of God and he is also the Son of Mary. He is truly and completely God and he is truly and completely human. Many people struggle with that. But Jesus said, “**No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.**” The Son of Man, of course, is the title Jesus most often used for himself. He came down from heaven. No human being alive on this earth can say that. We don't start out in heaven, we start down here. We have to die to get to heaven. But Jesus started in heaven because he is truly the Son of God.

And yet, he most certainly is a real human being. God the Son entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and was made man. So when Jesus was born, God the Son was born, even though God the Son had always existed. When Jesus lived and preached and slept and ate, God did all those things – God the Son – because Jesus is one person, who is both God and man. God lived a perfect life and that life counts for all of us human beings. And God died and paid for all the sins of all the world.

Jesus said, “**Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.**” In the Old Testament, when the people were in the wilderness before they settled in Israel, they rebelled against God and he sent poisonous snakes to bite them. But then he told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Moses set up that pole – he lifted up the snake – and everyone who trusted in God and looked at that snake lived. Jesus was lifted up on a pole, too – at his crucifixion. And why? So that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. Just as those who trusted God's word in the Old Testament lived, those who trust God's word and promise in the New Testament

also live. Jesus is our Savior. The Son of God laid down his life so that you and I have eternal life. That is what we teach our children in our school and our preschool. Knowing that love of God is the most practical knowledge that any human being can ever gain.

III.

But knowledge is in inadequate word for what we're talking about this morning. Knowing Jesus is more than just being able to pass a catechism class test. It's trusting the promises God made through Christ. It's clinging to him in life and in death so that we have peace now and so that we stand with him in heaven. How do we get that trust? Those very promises give it to us. We are reborn through them. **We are saved by the Trinity. The Holy Spirit gave us new birth.**

Jesus told Nicodemus, **"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."** Nicodemus was confused by that statement and he insisted on a rather dumb question about reentering his mother's womb. Jesus made it clear that he was talking about faith. He said that flesh gives birth to flesh but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. Flesh means our sinful nature. From my parents I inherited a sinful nature and so did you. That sinful nature touches and corrupts all that we are. There is nothing good that lives in us because of that sinful nature. This is a very hard truth to accept. It doesn't conform to the cult of self-esteem. How dare you teach our children that they're totally sinful and evil from birth? No one would ever believe this if God didn't say it in his word. But he does say it. Flesh gives birth to flesh. The only thing that I can pass on to my children is my sin. The more I rebel against that, the more I demonstrate how right Jesus was. The more I condemn myself to hell.

But God doesn't want me or my children in hell. So he sent Jesus to save us. And he sent the Holy Spirit to give us faith – to give us a new birth through the water and the Spirit, through baptism and through the word. Jesus compares the Spirit's work to the wind. Last week, I went a field trip with my youngest son. We went on a boat ride on the Detroit River. As we were tooling along, I was struck by how windy it was. Well, we passed Belle Isle and the tour guide warned us that the wind was actually at our backs and when we turned around, it was going to dramatically pick up. I had trouble believing that because there seemed to be so much wind already. But if he hadn't warned us, the river would've been full of caps and sunglasses. You couldn't tell that the wind was really behind us until it shifted around and hit us in our faces.

The Holy Spirit works like that. You can't see what he's doing. He blows where and when he wills and he creates faith. The most that you can see is the means of grace. The Holy Spirit works through the word and the sacraments. So we know that he's blowing when we preach and teach about Jesus. We know that he is sweeping into the hearts of kids and adults when we announce the love of Christ. That wind has been blowing here all year. So the Spirit comes into our hearts and comforts us and strengthens us to face the evils of life here and he prepares us for eternal life.

That's what the doctrine of the Trinity is about: the love of God. Now, there are many important aspects to this doctrine. I remember once in a Bible Information Class, I was going on and on trying to explain to a young couple all the ins and outs of this teaching and all the ways that we can confuse it and all the errors that can come up. I was trying to get them to understand what we can and what we can't say. Finally, the wife said to me, "Pastor, it is what it is." As a Christian, she believed it. She didn't have to understand it all. She just needed to know what God said. That's true for all of us. We believe in one God, in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That one God in three persons moved heaven and earth to pay for our sins and to give us faith so that we will live with him forever. What could be more practical than that? Amen.