

## Sermon for Feast of the Most Holy Trinity – John 3:1-15

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Can you imagine being in Nicodemus's shoes? He experienced the boundless curiosity about this teacher who had come from God. No one could do the signs Jesus did if God were not with him. But his curiosity was tempered by an uncertainty and a fear of what the other Pharisees would think of him. Perhaps also his own skepticism played a part. So Nicodemus visited the Lord at night, so that he might quench his curiosity in the secrecy of darkness. But, in so doing, darkness gives way to light. Yes, the very light that emanates from God shined through the darkness for Nicodemus, though he did not see it.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” What perplexing words Nicodemus hears! Heaven knows being born once is trouble enough to both baby and mother, but to have to go through it all again? The labor, and the pain, and the anxious moments. The wait for the first draw of infant breath: all this must be done again? No not this time: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” What does a Pharisee know about being born of water and the Spirit? What do we know of being born of water and the Spirit? Nicodemus looked at himself the same way we look at ourselves: he saw flesh and more flesh and nothing more but flesh. God made man from the dirt and dust of the earth which is his flesh. Water and dirt make mud, but not spirit. So where is the spirit?

“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” We can't control the work of the Holy Spirit no more than we can control the wind. When we hear the Word of God in preaching, we hear the Spirit. The Spirit always accompanies the Gospel. But the Spirit works on His own schedule. He determines when and if to bring people to faith. We have no control; we have no say over this.

Some who hear the Word of God reject it. In fact, Nicodemus looked the Kingdom of God straight in the eye, but couldn't see Him. Without the Spirit there is no faith, and the Spirit blows where He wills. So as much as we would like to be in control, and as much as we would like to expand the Kingdom of God by the power of our money or by our will power or by our clever strategies, we can't do it. We can cover our efforts with gimmicks; we can sweeten them with slogans and good intentions. But we cannot control, we can neither help nor stop, the Holy Spirit.

But on the other hand, maybe we, like Nicodemus, go looking for Jesus at night, in secret, when He is less likely to embarrass us, when our friends won't be around. We don't want to be perceived as zealots, do-gooders, and goody-two-shoes. We want people to like us. And we, of course, know better than God what men are capable of. His standards simply aren't reasonable. They have to be adjusted to the modern world. We set ourselves up as the great mediators between God and men. We love to pick which rules others ought to follow and how to apply them. Is fornication really so

wrong? Everyone does it. Is attending church really that important? What's the harm in skipping worship during the summer? Why should we ever try to remove the speck from our neighbors' eyes? After all, they're just specks. They're not planks. And on and on we go, not wanting people to dislike us for the sake of Jesus. We want people to know how nice Jesus is so that they think of Him as in the same category as Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny.

But as much as we try to downplay the law and as much as we resemble the cowardly Nicodemus, the Spirit still blows where He wills. And the amazing thing about Nicodemus is not what a fool he was that night, but the fact that the Lord never gave up on him. Remember, nothing slips through Our Lord's fingers. He not only drives forward for us, He also drives in reverse. Sometimes Baptism takes a lifetime before it kicks in.

Think about it: in death, Jesus was an offense, even to His own disciples. But not to Nicodemus. St. John's Gospel tells us that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea take care of our Lord's dead body. Jesus' Holy Body was destined for a mass grave just like all the other victims of Roman crucifixion. But Nicodemus helped remove that bloody corpse from the cross and carry it to Joseph's tomb. The Spirit blew into Nicodemus and he believed. To be numbered among that small band who took our Lord's precious Body to the sepulcher, of which not even the twelve are numbered, to be numbered among those who stood unafraid in the immediate aftermath of Our Lord's violent trial, torture, and death, to be faithful then during those moments, is perhaps the greatest of all achievements and honor. And Nicodemus is among them: converted, believing, and risking it all in the sure and certain hope that Jesus is the Kingdom of God who rebirths men as His sons. Nicodemus trusted that Jesus would breathe His spirit of Life into him and all the faithful, so that they would believe and not perish even though Christ Himself died. He trusted that the very dead body he carried, Jesus' Body, would be resurrected as He said.

The Spirit blows when and where He wills. He saved Nicodemus despite Nicodemus. That is the Gospel. Nicodemus saw Jesus lifted up from the earth, the emblem of death, the billboard of betrayal, a worm and not a man. Nicodemus saw Christ become sin for us, He saw Him counted as guilty of our sins. Nicodemus saw the Sacrifice, his own Holy Substitute, and was drawn to Him. The poison of the serpent left Nicodemus. The Spirit blew. Nicodemus believed. He was unafraid. He was unashamed. He awaited the glory and joy to come.

So on this Trinity Sunday, the Spirit blows again and reminds us of whom we always were: God's own children, with His Name placed upon us in Holy Baptism: the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit. Whoever believes this already has eternal life. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠