

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

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

“Jesus answered Nicodemus, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” In John chapter 3, we come in contact with Christianity’s vital little secret: a mystery that distinguishes Christianity from all other religions in the world. Every other religion in the world has its many attempts to satisfy man’s religious longings. They attempt to think God. They attempt to feel God. They attempt to find God. Even Atheists do this unknowingly. By the works of men and human righteousness, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Atheists have their imitations for seeking God but never experience finding Him. They exert themselves. They reach out toward a holy and distant god. Nicodemis still lives on today.

Yet, the experience of God and fellowship with God we find only in Christianity. “No one comes to the Father except by Me,” Jesus says. In the fullness of time, God, through this revelation, meets with us and saves us, His people. This, then, is the vital secret of Christianity, that we in Christ have life in God. That God Himself comes down and lifts us up into the most blessed fellowship with Himself. This is the vital secret: the mighty mysterious miracle of the new birth for us is in Holy Baptism.

But this new birth, this baptism, is undoubtedly Christianity’s greatest stumbling block. Even the noble and pious Nicodemis was startled when Jesus told him in plain language that he could not enter the kingdom of God without being born again. To the natural person, there is scarcely any aspect of Christianity which is more confounding or more offensive than that of the new birth in Holy Baptism. Perhaps you’ve heard people say this among themselves or to others (though, at times, we’ve thought these things ourselves): “Can God demand more of people than their best? If they pray, read, and strive against their sins, isn’t that good enough? If they do good deeds as far as their time, ability, and gifts permit, shouldn’t that count for something? Can God demand more? Is He not just? Is He not merciful?”

Baptism is the point at which Christianity differs most radically from every other religion. All other religions say, in one way or another, to all humanity: “You must become good. Do good, and you will become good – perfectly good!”

Over and against all these Christ stands alone and tells us: “You are wicked and evil. And you cannot *do* that which is good until you have *become* good.” For this is what makes a deed either good or bad. Through the new birth in Baptism we *become* good. And good deeds come from this alone. This is what Jesus tells Nicodemis. “Do not marvel that I say to you, ‘You must be born again.’” We all must be born again to acquire a heart which alone can perform deeds that are good.

And receiving God’s gift of Baptism, as we have, is the best news for us. This is being born again. We sinners have, by no merit of our own, received God’s righteousness in the washing of water and the word. “You are baptized!” May this truth resound in our ears forever. When we come to realize in our lives that we don’t love God; when we come to realize in our

lives that we don't hate sin, then it's good news that we received in Baptism free forgiveness as a gift from God. In Christ, all our sins are washed away.

But our inner Nicodemis fires back another question: "How can these things be?" "I have been baptized. I seek God. I tell Him everything and conceal and hide no sin from Him. But I don't feel that I'm part of God's new creation, His baptized child. Especially after this week. I haven't experienced nearness to God. I haven't known peace and rest. I haven't seen joy and bliss. I don't experience an aversion to sin. I don't desire to do the will of God. Instead, I feel fear, restlessness, anxiety, with only a few brief times of rest in between. Am I really secure in God's love for me?"

Every birth is painful. And our Baptism is no different. If we were baptized decades ago or last month, every birth is painful. A labor and delivery nurse once told my wife and I about one of her patients who was soon approaching active labor. In an attempt to acquire what sort of care this new mother desired, the nurse asked her pregnant patient to gauge what amount of pain she would be willing to endure during her labor on a scale of 1 to 10. The woman said "0." "Sorry, Lady. Ain't gonna happen." That would be impossible. Even with epidurals and modern medicine, every birth is painful. And the spiritual pains which you feel now in forms of restlessness, doubt, fear, and anxiety are your *birth* pains.

That which you are now experiencing, the pain and restlessness of your soul, is *life's* beginning: *death* and your entrance into eternal life. We all must be made aware of the sinful things in our lives and in our hearts. We care about ourselves only and care nothing for our neighbor or God. These thoughts must die. To see this is a terrifying experience which causes us to despair.

But on this Trinity Sunday, God the Father who created you, who willed that you be born in spite of inheriting Adam's sinful nature and the grief and pain you've caused the Lord since, still in His grace and mercy wanted you to exist. On this Trinity Sunday, God the Son, who redeemed you, who had a baptism to be baptized with by being lifted up on the cross, willingly gave up His life so that you could be born again and washed clean of all your sin when He baptized you. On this Trinity Sunday, God the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies you, is now in the full process of shaping and forming that new life within you. The new life must be encouraged and strengthened while at the same time the old life *dies*. We experience this new birth the moment we confess our sins and receive our Savior's forgiveness. What we feel thus far is only the mortifying aspect of this birth: doubt and fear.

But don't fear. Don't be confused. This is the work of the Triune God in our souls. It's painful. Every birth is. But it's necessary. All thanks be to the Holy Trinity who is putting to death our old life and transforming us into souls who hunger only for grace and forgiveness, until in the life to come when we need grace and forgiveness no more. Amen.

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