

June 12, 2022  
Text: John 3:1-17

## The Holy Trinity

If you've spent any length of time around small children, you've heard the question: "Why?" This comes in many forms. "Why is the moon so far away?" "Why are bumblebees fuzzier than honeybees?" "Why do I have to eat my green beans?" This child-like curiosity is a wonderful thing, and it's reflective of a part of our created nature that seeks to understand and care for this creation in which God has placed us.

Yet this desire to know, to understand, and the ensuing knowledge that we uncover, can easily become an idol or a stumbling block. We see this in the matter of our very salvation, as we try to understand why and how that is.

Though God did leave some things as mysteries which lie outside the grasp of human understanding, He is clear on this: we are saved, not by what we know, but by who we are in Christ.

We see this difference between knowing and being in our Gospel text. The focus on knowledge as the assumed path to life is heard in the words of Nicodemus. He approaches Jesus and gives to Him many words of praise. "Rabbi." "A teacher sent from God."

Very nice, yet what are these all focused on? They're about knowledge. Nicodemus sees Jesus as one who is there to impart facts and information about God to the people. And knowing about God is certainly a good thing!

Yet what is Nicodemus missing? Things like "Savior," "Redeemer," "Lamb of God." The Old Testament is clear that when the Messiah comes, He'll do more than simply teach Israel about their God.

The Messiah would come and pay the penalty, be the sacrifice, to wipe away Israel's sin. And, having wiped out that sin, the Lord – through the Messiah – would gather His people back to Himself. There's more to being the people of God than just knowing a lot about Him.

This is why Jesus responds to Nicodemus as He does. "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." At first, this seems like a random reply, a non sequitur. "You're a good teacher." "You must be born again." Did we miss something there?

No, we didn't. Jesus is directing Nicodemus, and us, back to what is the more important thing. You will not see the kingdom of God because of what you know in your mind, but because of who you are. Jesus speaks of being born again, or more literally, being begotten from above.

Being a Christian isn't an outward facade that can be memorized and then put up or pulled down when needed. Being a Christian, one who bears Christ, is something that is at the very center of who you are, the core of your existence.

When you were begotten, conceived, by your earthly parents, you came into being. Your identity as their child was set. You received your very genetic makeup from each of them. You were you at that very moment and from that moment on.

This is what Jesus is speaking about to Nicodemus. You are one of God's people if God is your Father. It's no mere outward label. God comes by His Spirit and recreates you.

In the waters of Holy Baptism, which Jesus speaks of as a begetting of water and the Spirit, you are given a new life, a spiritual life, an eternal life. God there fulfills His promise to create a new heart and restore a right spirit within you. He rebuilds you as His temple and comes to dwell within you.

At the font you become a child of God, with God the Father becoming your loving Father, God the Son becoming your brother, and God the Holy Spirit becoming the One who dwells in your heart. This new identity, this new reality, is one that will far outlast anything of this world. This new life is a life that will not perish, even as this sinful, fallen world is judged and destroyed at the end of days.

This right belief, a right understanding of being a Christian as having a new life from God, and not just one who has memorized a bunch of facts, gives us certainty and peace in the face of the world's attacks and the devil's temptations.

Satan knows this, which is why he is constantly seeking to get us to revert back to looking at the faith as simply things which are known by our minds. If he can convince us of this lie, then he has a lot easier time strangling our faith.

If someone thinks that being a Christian is just knowing the Gospel story or memorizing the Apostles' Creed, well then, once you've learned that, why come to church? If it's as simple as remembering some Bible stories, you have that knowledge in your head regardless of whether you're in church or on the lake or in your camper or at a football stadium. This temptation is used to cut Christians off from one another, from the body of Christ.

Another temptation found in this "academic" approach to the faith is that the faith then doesn't need to have much bearing on your life. You don't start living differently when you learn the Pythagorean Theorem or the names of the state capitols, so why live differently if the Christian faith is just knowing stuff? You can still say you're a Christian and then do as you please! This flies in the face of the Scriptures, which teach us that "faith without works is dead."

The effects of these temptations are seen all too well in our young people. Many get confirmed and then are never seen again, except maybe at Christmas and Easter, if that. They've done their learning, checked off the boxes, jumped through the hoops, so why come back? If you don't go back to high school after you get your diploma, why go back to church after you've got your confirmation certificate? You've learned the stuff, so why not spend your Sunday mornings doing something you enjoy? This temptation is used by Satan to lead a lot of people down the broad and easy path to destruction.

Yet God does not leave us to face this temptation by ourselves. He comes through His word, which is more than just letters on a page but which is the voice of the Spirit, and through the Spirit's power He changes our hearts and minds, causes us to believe that we are truly God's children – not His pupils, but His children – and through this blunts the attacks of the evil one.

Through the gift of faith, we see that God gives us His Word and Sacrament not as optional extras but as our source of life, just as eating and drinking are for our physical life. Through these

divinely-established means, God nourishes and sustains our faith and life, even if we don't know exactly how He does this.

By realizing that we are God's children, we are given much greater comfort by the fact that, as our loving Father, God cannot and will not abandon us His children. The fact that God sent His only-begotten Son to die in our place becomes not just a Bible verse you have to memorize in Sunday School but rather an unshakable proof that God loves you, regardless of what's going on in the world.

Because you have been begotten by the Spirit and are not just a creature of flesh, you can be certain that your life isn't an accident but a gift from above.

Believing who you are as a baptized, regenerated child of God also then lets you rightly grasp and use the knowledge which God has given. Through this knowledge given in God's word, you can know better your own identity.

You are the purposeful creation of a loving God. The story of God's people throughout the ages is your story. You have been made clean, your sins forgiven, your guilt taken away, in the waters of Baptism, and so you need not doubt or fear. When you die, you will live – forever – because God loves you too much to let you be taken from Him by death.

Understanding who you are also lets you use that knowledge to pass the faith on to others. This starts in the home, as parents teach the faith not as a list of stuff to be memorized, but as the story of who they and their children are.

We often take pride in our families' earthly heritage and the life and traditions which have been handed down to us; how much more should we share with joy and enthusiasm our heavenly heritage, won for us and all generations by the blood of Jesus.

And this doesn't only apply to earthly, biological parents, but also includes any child which God has placed in your life. Share with them the story of the Gospel, show them what it means to live the life of a Christian, that they might know more about the God who loves them and see what that love looks like in word and action.

And understanding of who you are in Christ also is invaluable in sharing the Gospel with your neighbor, doing the work of an evangelist. If the Christian faith is just a list of facts, well who would convert to that? But this is a life which Jesus gives, a new and hopeful existence.

To share the faith is to share why you have hope for tomorrow, comfort in the midst of sorrow, purpose in the face of an ever-shifting world. And all of it grounded in the Lord Jesus, the God who came not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through Him.

Because this new life is God's work and not man's, you can share the Gospel without the pressure being on you! Being born isn't something you made a decision about; you came out of your mother when factors completely outside your control decided it was time. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

He has promised to work through those Means of Grace – the Word and the Sacraments – to create and sustain saving faith. Their effectiveness is based on God's power and promises, not our reason or understanding. We don't have to know exactly how He does this, just we don't need to

understand Bernoulli's Principle in order to ride in an airplane or grasp the workings of digestive enzymes in order to eat a cheeseburger.

God has promised to work, and our faith is evidence that He does work, so we can simply proclaim His wonderful Gospel to the nations and trust that He, in mercy and love, will continue to beget new Christians into His holy and eternal family, the Church.

Going back to our example of children asking questions of their parents, the "why?" often you get to one of two answers: "Because that's the way it is," or "Because I'm your father and I love you." This can cover about anything, from why Jupiter is the largest planet to why you need to eat your green beans before you have dessert.

These two answers also help us understand our lives as Christians in a sinful world. "Why is God three persons in one?" "Why did He give us Holy Baptism?" "Why do I need to continue to hear the Word?" "Because God made you and knows what's best for you."

"Why will I be saved?" Not because of what you've learned, but "because God is your Father, and as His child, He loves you."

In Jesus' name, amen.