

Three-in-One Plus One

John 3:1-17

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Imagine with me for a moment, the delight you would experience in discovering that you had a long-lost uncle or aunt who had made you the heir to their estate. Can you see it? You'd wake up one morning and discover that they had left you riches beyond count, that your major financial worries were over, and that you really didn't have to worry all that much about the future.

If that scenario happened, how would you feel? What would you do? Or more to the point, what would you do *differently*? And here I don't mean what would you run out and buy though I suspect that most of us would treat ourselves to something – but I mean something more like, what would be different about your day-to-day attitudes, practices, habits, and outlook? How would knowing that your future is absolutely secure change your present?

I ask because this is what Jesus says, in effect, to Nicodemus, inviting him to imagine the opportunity through life in the Spirit to be born anew, as God's children, those so precious God was willing to give his only Son as testament to how much God loves all of us.

Which brings me to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Look, here's the thing: I don't for a moment pretend to understand the Trinity, and quite frankly I don't frankly trust those who say they do. (Goodness, but even St. Augustine said it was beyond him.) But I do know this: at the heart of our understanding of God as somehow three persons in relationship is the notion that you can't fully or finally understand God without talking about relationship.

Some say that's why God created the cosmos and humanity in the first place, to have more people to love. But the Trinity goes even further, saying that from the very beginning of time the dynamic power of love is at the heart of God's identity and character and can only be captured – dimly! – by thinking of the love that is shared, in relationships.

And so, God's essential and core being has always been a giving and receiving and sharing of love that finally spills out into the whole of the universe and invites all of us into it. First through creation and God's series of covenants, then and pre-eminently in the sending of God's Son to demonstrate in word and deed just how much God loves us, and now as the Spirit bears witness to God's ongoing love for us and all creation.

Which means, I think, that when we talk about the Trinity as God being three-in-one, we really haven't captured the heart of the doctrine and reality unless we recognize that God is three-in-one in order always to add one more – and that's us, all of us, an infinite “plus one” through which God's love is made complete in relationship with all of God's children. And that's what this passage about Nicodemus testifies to – the profound love of God that draws us into relationship with God, with each other, and with the whole of creation and the cosmos.

So, what does it mean for us to live knowing we are God's beloved children, adopted and chosen and named co-heirs with Christ? And when I ask this, I'm not actually doing the heaven-and-hell-thing, as if you can sum up your life as Christians as a get-out-of-hell card. Rather, I mean what difference does it make NOW?

Take a closer look at Nicodemus, a man in the prime of his life, a community leader, a respected official in his religion, a man who is enjoying everything he has accomplished, his place in the community. Nicodemus comes to see the young rabbi from Nazareth at night. It may have been because he didn't want anybody to see him. He was embarrassed, this substantial, respected, powerful, middle-aged man to be seen, talking to, visiting with, inquiring of Jesus of Nazareth.

The conversation is tortured. “Rabbi—you must be someone important because of all these wonderful acts you are performing—to turn water into wine. No one could do that without supernatural power.” Jesus’ answer is a non-sequitur: “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above or born again.”

And now, we learn something interesting about Nicodemus. Not only is he middle-aged, secure, settled, and respected. He doesn’t have much imagination, which, come to think of it, is part of what happens sometimes on the way to becoming secure, settled, and middle-aged. In any event, Nicodemus doesn’t recognize a good metaphor when he stumbles over it.

“How can anyone be born after having grown old?” The Greek word, by the way, *anōthen*, can be translated either “born from above” or “born again.”

The novelist Frederick Buechner has a little fun with Nicodemus’ literalism, and has him ask Jesus, “Just how are you supposed to pull a thing like that off when you are pushing sixty-five? How did you get born again when it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning?” (Peculiar Treasures, p. 122).

Nicodemus defines faith as keeping the law. He’s an expert at it. You live up to God’s expectations by living a good, pure, moral life. And he can’t see the new reality in front of his eyes, can’t give himself to newness and hopefulness. “Are you a teacher and you cannot understand?” Jesus asks him.

And then the Gospel writer John, writing this all down, adds an editorial comment, does a little preaching. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” The Gospel in miniature, Martin Luther called that single sentence.

Nicodemus hears that God is infinitely more than religious systems and institutions. Because of that you have to rethink everything. God cares about the law and your morality, but God wants more from you than that. God wants you to live fully and joyfully and faithfully in relationship. God has something in mind for you, and sometimes to realize that, to claim it, to live it, you have to do something risky, something outrageous, something very brave, like coming to see Jesus under the cover of darkness.

God loves the world with passionate abandon, with utter commitment, and wants more than anything for you and me to know that, to let that amazing news change the way we think about the world—God’s beloved, about other people—God’s children, about yourself—loved forever by God; and to re-create us, so that there is no better way to describe it than rebirth.

It happened to Nicodemus—gradually— which is also, I believe, the way it happens for most of us.

Peter Gomes writes, “What ‘born again’ means is literally to begin all over again, to be given a second chance. The one who is born again doesn’t all of a sudden turn into a super Christian. To be born again is to enter afresh into the process of spiritual growth. It is to wipe the slate clean. It is to cancel your old mortgage and start again. ‘You must be born again,’ is an offer from God you can’t afford to refuse” (The Good Book, p. 188).

Born again. It is not a threat. It’s a promise. It’s a gift. It comes to Nicodemus in the middle of the night when he does something unconventional and risky and opens his heart and soul and life and future to something brand new.

It’s a gift and comes because, as John put it, God so loves the world, doesn’t condemn the world, but loves the world, a gift—offered to you and me; an invitation to live all the life we have been given; to live in all the glorious freedom of knowing that you are loved and that nothing will ever separate you from that love and that Jesus Christ is God’s promise, God’s assurance, God’s love among us.

The Bible, Gomes says, “is full of the companionship of the confused and seeking, men and women made of the most ordinary stuff who often fail to understand, who make

mistakes, whose humanity is transparent, but who encounter the living God and whose lives are therefore changed” (Ibid).

How does it happen? Sometimes it happens when, like Nicodemus, we go looking for Jesus, even if it’s late at night and we’re feeling a little foolish. And sometimes it happens because God forces the issue and comes into our lives with unexpected, life-giving love.

Born again. It may be God’s summons to put the place up for sale, open your hands, let go of everything and walk into the wilderness with nothing much by way of certainty but God’s love.

In her book, *The Gift of Years*, Joan Chittister, Benedictine sister, and bestselling author, who turned eighty-eight this year, wrote of her life, “The task of this period of life is not simply to endure the coming of the end of time. It is to come alive in ways I have never been alive before...I begin to see the world differently. It is to be treasured, to be explored, to be enjoyed.”

And then this statement that made me think of old Nicodemus coming to Jesus: “The number of absolutes in my life is precipitously reduced. I’m a lot less dogmatic about the nature of God. I’m not as sure as I once was about what is gravely damning and what is not. Most important of all, I am happy to put that decision in the hands of God, whose nature seems far more compassionate now” (p. 42).

Born again. It may be God’s summons to do something outrageous, like joining the church, giving your love to a stranger, your money to a cause, giving your life away. . . .

And it may mean simply saying “yes” to the voice that has been calling you, prodding your conscience, compelling your love, saying “yes” to God’s great love for you in Jesus Christ.

Born again. It’s not a threat, it’s a promise; a gracious invitation from the one who gave you life . . . to listen, to let go, to follow. Because “God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

Amen.