

Festival of the Holy Trinity | St. John 3:1-15  
May 31, 2015 | Parkland Evangelical Lutheran Church

**In Nomine Iesu**

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O Lord God, heavenly Father: We poor sinners confess that in our flesh dwells no good thing, and that, left to ourselves, we die and perish in sin, since that which is born of flesh is flesh and cannot see the kingdom of God. But we pray that You would grant us Your grace and mercy, and for the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, send Your Holy Spirit into our hearts, that being regenerate we may firmly believe the forgiveness of sins according to Your promise in baptism, and that we may daily increase in Christian love and in other good works, until we at last obtain eternal salvation; through the same Your beloved Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 157)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for this morning is taken from the third chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:*

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." / Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." / Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" / Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 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." / Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" / Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, We speak of what We know, and bear witness to what We have seen, but you do not receive Our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life." (ESV)

*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)*

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In Christ Jesus, who came down from heaven in order to bring us back to heaven with Him, dear fellow redeemed:

Let's say you have lived an average life—you have not done anything too remarkable or too terrible. Or let's suppose that you have not lived a good life—you have engaged in various criminal activities and are interested in nothing more than your own well-being. Then it

happens that one day, someone heroically gives up his life to save yours. Overcome by such selflessness, such a sacrifice, you vow to him, "I will change my ways; I will live a better life!"

What would it take to prove that the sacrifice was worthwhile? A person in this position could never really be sure. Even if the criminal gave up his wayward ways and dedicated his life to helping others, he would have the nagging doubt of whether he had proved himself worthy. The question would constantly be on his mind: "Have I done enough?"

That is a question that all people wrestle with in one way or another. Many wonder if they are good enough for God. Others who deny there is a God still seek approval for what they do. They want others to tell them that they are worth something, that it matters to someone that they are alive. Maybe some of you here today are bothered because you are not as good as you know you should be. Or maybe you think you are pretty good, and that bothers you because you know you should be more humble.

Though Nicodemus did not have much to say in today's text, it is clear that his basic question for Jesus was, "What makes someone good before God?" Jesus' answer was difficult for him to accept just as it is for all the descendants of Adam, namely, that **All Good Comes from God**.

## I

Nicodemus was recognized by the Jewish people as a good man. He was a member of the Pharisees, a group known for their holy living. He was also called a "ruler" or "authority" among the Jews and belonged to the Jewish ruling council. Jesus referred to him as "*the teacher of Israel*," indicating his respected position. Not only was Nicodemus held up as a good man, he thought the same about himself. This was the Pharisee way: Do your best to follow Moses' Law (and all the other laws the Jews had established), and God will be happy with you.

But this is not the way Jesus talked. He pointed everyone, from the Pharisees to the prostitutes, not to their own righteous efforts but to the righteousness of God. When one who trusted in his own righteousness approached Jesus asking Him, "[W]hat must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied, "*No one is good except God alone*" (Lk. 18:18,19). In other words, no one is holy enough and good enough for God. To say this troubled the Pharisees is an understatement, since their entire way of life was built around their own righteous acts. Because of this, most of the Pharisees vehemently lashed out at Jesus, accusing Him of being opposed to the Law of God and acting as an agent of Satan.

And yet, it was hard to ignore the amazing things Jesus said and did. Nicodemus spoke for his brothers when he said, "*Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.*" Quite an admission – we know you have come from God! But if Jesus was from God, why did He criticize the Pharisees and the traditions of the fathers? Something did not fit. So Nicodemus came to Jesus "*by night.*" He did not want to risk losing his exalted position. But he did want Jesus to further explain Himself, so that Nicodemus might finally be settled about who Jesus was.

His conversation with Jesus had an unsettling effect. Far from becoming more secure in his self-righteousness, he was forced to question whether all his good deeds to that point were actually good! What if all of that counted for nothing before God! This is what Jesus seemed to be

saying. He said, "[U]nless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." The word translated "again" can just as properly be translated "from above": "[U]nless one is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God." This is why Nicodemus' quip about going back into your mother's womb cannot be taken seriously. Jesus further explained, "[U]nless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

If a person is conceived and born in the natural way, then he is flesh. If he is born again, born from above, then he is born of the Spirit. And if he is born of the Spirit, then he is no longer considered fleshly, but spiritual. In other words, there are only two kinds of people in the world: 1) those who are born of the Spirit, and 2) those who are not.

Many Christian people today say that you are "born again" if you have made a decision to open your heart to Jesus and have committed yourself to keep His Law. If you fail to live up to this standard, then it is questionable whether you were really "born again" in the first place. In this view, being "born again" is something done by man for God and not by God for man. But that is clearly not what Jesus is teaching Nicodemus. He tells Nicodemus that all people need to be "born from above," or they remain in their sins. God must grant this rebirth. Salvation depends on it.

Nicodemus did not want to hear that, and neither do you and I. We want to think that our good behavior should count for something. God says I am not better than anyone else, but in my heart I know I am. I am not a criminal. I support my family. I help other people. But then I hear Jesus saying, "*No one is good except God alone*"? Sounds like a special kind of arrogance.

But Jesus is not mistaken. It is you and me and all sinners who are. We define "good" differently than God does. We imagine that "civil good" should count the same way before God as it does in the world. If you are a law-abiding citizen, a tireless volunteer, a generous philanthropist, you will be praised by others. But that does not make you good before God. God demands perfection in our actions, words, and thoughts. He demands perfection because He is perfection. If you want to be in His holy presence, you have to be holy too. If God let you into heaven by your own standard of holiness, then heaven couldn't be holy.

## II

No descendant of Adam has met God's standard of "good" – all except for One. This is the One who was conceived not in the natural way, "who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary" (Apostles' Creed). God the Father sent down His only Son, in order to reconcile us back to Him. The holy God took on flesh to save the human race. It was the only possible plan of rescue. Unless One in the flesh kept the perfect Law of God, and unless that One was also God Himself, His righteousness could not count for humankind. But because Jesus is God and Man, His holy life is sufficient for all. You are considered to be good and holy and righteous before God because of what Jesus did for you.

But how can you be sure that God sees you in this way? After all, you don't always do what you should, and when you do, you are often prideful about it. God sees you as good, not because of what you have or have not done, but because of what Jesus has done. Jesus stated in today's text, "*whoever believes in [the Son of Man] may have eternal life.*" No works of ours

required, no effort, no personal goodness. You are holy before God through faith in Jesus. And this faith was brought to you by God the Holy Spirit. Through His working in the means of grace, you have been “born from above.” God has given you new birth, new life, salvation.

He is so concerned that you know these gifts are yours, that He instituted a special Sacrament to give these gifts. When the water is applied and the words of Jesus are spoken in Baptism, this is a certain and visible sign that the transaction has been made. The sins of the flesh are removed from the one baptized, and Jesus’ righteousness is bestowed in their place. The one who “*is born of water and the Spirit*” is covered by Christ’s righteousness and becomes a member of His body.

This is why the words of Jesus should not concern us when He says, “*No one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*” Jesus is not saying here that no one will join Him in heaven, but rather that all will join Him who have been united with Him by faith. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus takes multitudes of people back with Him into heaven. One of our Lutheran theologians puts it this way, “Therefore, whoever thinks he is going to heaven must climb onto Christ as onto a ladder and be carried up to heaven on His divine back. Christ is the gate, ship, bridge, and passage through which we must come to the Father” (Spangenberg, *The Christian Year of Grace*, p. 231).

Not Nicodemus, or you, or I are worthy to go to heaven. We are not good. But God is good, and in His love, God the Father sent His only-begotten Son to win our salvation. The Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, now distributes this salvation throughout the world by the Gospel, and He works the good in us that we now do as children of God. **All Good Comes from God**, from above. By Him you are born again, and in Him you will join all the saints and angels in heaven, praising His holy name.

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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