

Title: “At the End of Understanding”

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John 3:1-17

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Service Readings: Is. 6:1-8; Acts 2:14a, 22-36; John 3:1-17

Lesson: *Something like this: Trinity and the unknown. There is a limit to what is knowable. What do we do when we reach that point? Nicodemus assumingly pushed through it, as evidenced by his contribution to the burial of Jesus. What about us?*

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Nicodemus may not have understood it and he may not have recognized it, but in this passage, Jesus teaches him about the Holy Trinity. God the creator, creates us. We cannot be *born again* unless we are *created again*. And we cannot have eternal life without Jesus, the Son of Man who was lifted up. And we cannot believe unless the Holy Spirit dwells within us. Listen again to a portion of the passage:

³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴ 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?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ 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.” ...

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life

Like Nicodemus, we too are taught about the Trinity. We learn it in Sunday School, in our Confirmation classes; we talk about it in our Bible studies, and even describe it every Sunday when together we speak the words of the Apostles Creed. We accept it as fact and don't spend too much time trying to understand it because, quite simply, we can't. We find it impossible to really comprehend and so we rarely even try. We simply take God at his word. But we are human, and we like to understand the world around us and so we are left with an impossible tension between that which we can know and that which we cannot. And how often we try to fill in the gaps of our knowledge, as it were, with human understanding. And this passage is one such example. We can see Nicodemus struggling with what he hears. We can picture him trying desperately to follow along as Jesus teaches. We can picture him trying to look upon the tapestry that Jesus is weaving as

he explains God, the Spirit, and himself. It must have been so confusing. And so, in many ways we can forgive Nicodemus because, at this time and place, Jesus is still alive. He has yet to die and rise again. And so, from Nicodemus' human perspective, Jesus looks like a man, acts like a man, and so he must be a man. But since he also performs miracles, he must also be more than a man. That feels right so he accepts it as fact: "Here stands a man who is like me but also more. He can do what I can do, but also more. But.... where does this more come from? Obviously, God. Who else could make man more?"

And it is from this perception, although flawed, that Nicodemus has engaged Jesus with the question and discussion concerning rebirth. Once again, he takes what he knows and tries to build a bridge to what is unknown - what Jesus is presenting to him as new knowledge. We watch him struggle with this and we are not told of the outcome, but we do hear about him two more times in John's Gospel - the last, when he assists Joseph in preparing the lifeless body of Jesus for burial after the crucifixion. So, we can have some confidence that Nicodemus didn't reject these teachings, even if he couldn't understand them.

We live on the other side of the cross. We live in the knowledge and experience of the resurrection of our Lord and Nicodemus might say that we are in a better position to understand that which he struggled with. But is that true? We know that Jesus is God. We know that he died. We know that he was resurrected. We know that he lives - fully man, fully God. These bring us a few steps farther than Nicodemus, but is our distance traveled all that significant in our knowledge and understanding of God, of Jesus, and of the Holy Spirit? Can we say much more about all of this than Nicodemus could? We have campuses full of people who try to explain it, who try to "dig deep" and explore the mysteries of God but no matter how far they travel, they always end up at a point that requires a bridge to be built between what is known and what is left unknowable. It's not that we just haven't figured it out yet; it's that we can *never* figure it out. We can *never* know everything. We can *never* comprehend what God can.

We all end up at the edge of the cliff of human understanding when it comes to the things of God. Whether it concerns God's redemptive work in our Baptism, Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, the Holy Trinity, or so many other things. We always end up at a place where the next step is impossible for us to comprehend, impossible for us to understand. So, what do we do when we reach that point? Do we try to build our own bridge to connect what is unknown?

We can try but we will fail. We will attach one side of our bridge to human understanding but will have no ability to anchor the other side to anything. We'll end up building a bridge that goes nowhere. Instead, Jesus tells us in this passage not to worry about what is unknown. Don't focus on the bridge, he says. Don't try to comprehend the inner workings of God. These things are not for you to know. Instead, focus on what has been made known to you by the Holy Spirit. And what has been made known? That we have been born, not by any command of ourselves but by the command of the Father. That through him all things have been created, even us. That by the power of that same word in Baptism he recreates us in Christ Jesus and adopts us into his family as heirs to his kingdom. That he does this, not on account of anything that we have done to deserve this grace but only on account of what Jesus has done on our behalf. That on the cross Jesus became our sin to secure victory over death. And that he then handed that victory over to us.

This is what the Holy Spirit makes known. And he makes known that through that same Baptism he has entered in and dwells within us. And he does so to bring to us the benefits that Christ won on the cross. For those who believe in him he enables, through faith, to grasp onto that forgiveness, that everlasting life, that salvation. And we keep clinging to it even when we reach a point where human understanding ends and faith begins.

You see, Jesus' message to us today is this: when you reach the cliff of understanding, when by your own knowledge and comprehension you can take not another step, fear not, for your salvation depends not on your movement, not on your activity, not on your understanding, but on Christ's. Nicodemus asked Jesus, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" This morning we see that this was the wrong question, for it presupposed that man was responsible for some action, responsible for some part in the act of his salvation. But he's not. *You're not. Jesus is.* He comes to you by the command of the Father and his grace rests upon you through the work of the Holy Spirit. You don't have to travel to him. Indeed, you cannot travel to him. He must come *to you*. And he *does* come to you and he offers you life everlasting. You need not worry about how; you need not struggle with why. Just know that he does. Worry not about how or why. Just live in the peace of knowing that it was done.

Please pray with me.

Dear Lord, please give me the heart to trust you completely. Help me fight the pride of leaning on my own knowledge and intelligence. May I be faithful in thanksgiving to all You have given me, and may I follow your teaching. In Jesus' name, Amen.

<https://dailyprayerguide.net/prayer-overcoming-pride-proverbs-3-5-6/#:~:text=Dear%20Lord%2C%20please%20give%20me,in%20Jesus'%20name%2C%20Amen.>