

THE HOLY TRINITY

JOHN 3:1-15

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

Today is Holy Trinity Sunday. But is such a thing really necessary? Do we not recognize the Holy Trinity every Sunday? In fact, by my count, we have already done so six times in this service alone!

There is also the objection that the Feast of the Holy Trinity is “a feast of doctrine”? As we will soon confess in the Athanasian Creed, “we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance” (line 4). The obvious counter is that every feast day is doctrinal: Christmas celebrates the Incarnation of our Lord, His being made man; Easter the Atonement and our redemption from sin, death, and the devil; Pentecost the work of the Holy Spirit in calling us to faith by the Gospel.

So what about today? What do we celebrate on this Holy Trinity Sunday? Simply put, today is a celebration of the mystery of God. How can one God exist as three distinct persons, each fully God and Lord? I don’t know—it’s a mystery! The word “Trinity” isn’t even in the Bible; but, it’s a word we use as shorthand for this teaching that is, from the opening verses of Genesis to the final “Amen” of Revelation. (Check out, for example, Matthew 3, where all three persons of the Godhead appear simultaneously!) We may not understand it, but God’s Word says it, and so we believe it.

Indeed, such a faith is necessary. Again, the Creed states, “whoever desires to be saved must think thus about the Trinity” (line 26). Why? Because this is who God is! If someone introduces himself to you as Bill, you don’t say, “No, you know what, I’m going to call you Frank.” “But,” says Bill, “I’m Bill.” “Yeah, I don’t care.” No, you call Bill by his given name! So it is with God. We dare not make light of how He’s introduced Himself to us in His Word.

Especially since who God is is so intimately connected with what God does. The Father is best known as our Creator, the Son our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit our Sanctifier. Deny any one of them, and the whole thing falls apart. Jesus says, “The one who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me” (Luke 10:16). Stephen said to those who stoned him, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51). There is simply no room for negotiation. “Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith,” that is, the one faith of which St. Paul speaks in Ephesians 4, the one that’s been handed down to us by faithful Christians

for millenia. And the catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance.

For our celebration, then, we have this text from John's Gospel that makes mention of the work of all three persons of the Trinity. It begins by introducing us to a man named Nicodemus, "a man of the Pharisees...a ruler of the Jews." We think of the Pharisees as bad guys, but they were actually good people, the kind you'd look up to. And the people did. Jesus even says, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). Outwardly, they were above reproach. They kept the commandments. They worked hard their entire lives to be counted worthy of eternal life. Think of St. Paul's résumé in Philippians 3: "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee...as to righteousness under the law, blameless." That's Nicodemus. Plus, he's a ruler of the Jews, which probably means he sat on the council of seventy, the Sanhedrin. In other words, this is a very impressive and accomplished individual.

He's even friendly toward Jesus. (There weren't many Pharisees who were.) He comes to Him by night and says 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." He doesn't accuse Him of being a demon or a Samaritan, as certain other scribes and Pharisees will, but rightly acknowledges that Jesus is from God and that His signs, His miracles, point to the fact that God is with Him.

But if Nicodemus was hoping for some praise from Jesus, he is sorely disappointed. Jesus answers him, "Truly, Truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." He returns Nicodemus' kind words with a rebuke: As close as Nicodemus thinks he is to entering the kingdom of God, he's not even close. For that, he's going to need a whole new birth. He's basically telling him he needs to start over. Can you imagine? It'd be like asking our high school graduates to tear up their new diplomas, pack their lunches, and go back to kindergarten. Nicodemus has spent his entire life working to enter the kingdom of God, and here Jesus tells him it's not enough.

It's not enough, because the truth is even someone as outwardly righteous as Nicodemus is not really righteous at all. There's a lot more to keeping the Law than simply not murdering anyone or doing everything your parents tell you. It must be kept perfectly, with all your body, yes, but also "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). Not even the Pharisees did this, as Jesus says elsewhere, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and

all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:27-28).

And if that’s true of the Pharisees, then how true is it of us? We confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean, but we have no idea the true depth of our depravity. We may actually think we’re doing OK. But God’s Word says otherwise, that we, who were brought forth in iniquity, who were conceived in our mothers’ sin, are not just not doing OK, but we’re in need of a whole new birth ourselves.

Nicodemus asks the obvious question: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb?” Jesus clarifies: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” So, this new birth of which Jesus speaks is not physical but spiritual, for, He says, “That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of spirit is spirit.” “Flesh” refers to our sinful human nature, all that we are, and are able to do, on our own, since the Fall, which is not much. St. Paul writes, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” More than that, he says we were dead in our sins, following the course of this sinful world, following the devil, and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind.

What we need, then, is a different kind of birth, a new birth, of water and the Spirit. Only Spirit can give birth to spirit; the flesh is no help at all. No amount of keeping the Law, or avoiding sin, can pry open the gates of paradise. The Old Adam in us must be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and a new man made to emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. And this new birth of water and the Spirit takes place in our Baptism, as St. Paul says in Titus 3: “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5-8).

“Do not marvel at this,” Jesus tells Nicodemus. Baptism may not look like much of a work, but it’s God’s work, and God doesn’t work in the way we expect. God works like the wind, which “blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” Whereas the world may be impressed with someone like Nicodemus, God hides Himself in that which appears thoroughly unimpressive, choosing “what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are” (1 Corinthians 1:28). The Pharisees, remember, had rejected Baptism. They didn’t see it as necessary for salvation. But Jesus says, “You must

be born again through Baptism. Leave behind your filthy rags, and come and be clothed in righteousness.”

The question is, if not ours, then whose? “How can these things be?” Nicodemus says. How can Baptism save? How can sinners be reconciled to God, if not by their own works? Jesus answers, “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.” Nicodemus’s whole life has been spent trying to ascend into heaven. Now, Jesus gives him good news: You may not be able to come up to me, but I’ve come down to you. I’ve been sent by My Father to rescue you. You may be dead in your trespasses and sins, but I’ve come to make you alive. You may be a poor, miserable sinner, but I’ve come to fulfill all righteousness on your behalf. You may justly deserve God’s eternal wrath and punishment, but I’ve come to make peace, to confess to your crimes, and to die your death, so you can go free. You don’t even have to do anything. Only believe that I’ve done it for you, and you will be with Me in paradise.

And this same good news is also for you. Baptism saves, because Jesus saves, and the washing of water with the Word is how He applies His saving work to you. Jesus died and rose again to take away your sin. He ascended into heaven to become your King. And in your Baptism, God the Father has given you the new birth of water and of the Spirit and has forgiven you all your sins. You don’t live in order to be born again; you are born again, and then you live. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). Good works are merely the fruit of faith, the inevitable result of having been made alive in Christ. No life, no fruit. Thus, when we confess at the end of the Athanasian Creed, “those who have done good will enter into eternal life” (line 39), that’s just another way of saying what Jesus says to Nicodemus: “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Dear friends, this is the catholic faith; whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved. But whoever believes and is baptized will be. That’s the promise. And the promise is for you.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**