



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Trinity Sunday
May 30, 2021

Incredulous Nicodemus

John 3:1–17

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² 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.” 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.”

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ 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. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 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.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

It's risky to go lobbing questions at the Son of God. “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Rabbi, is it I [who will betray you]?” “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?” “Are you the King of the Jews?” “How can a man be born when He is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”

Perhaps Jesus prompted Nicodemus’ question when He abruptly changed the subject of the conversation, saying: “Truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Later in the conversation, He elaborates: “Truly, I say to you, unless one is born of *water and the Spirit*, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Flattery gets Nicodemus nowhere, if indeed he intends flattery.



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Nicodemus is an interesting character. Some have accused him of cowardice, saying that he put his religious standing ahead of his faith by visiting Jesus under cover of darkness. Others say that he was too concerned about causing offense and that's why he came when he did. Whatever the case, Jesus changes the rules midstream by making these bold statements about entering the kingdom of God – statements, by the way, which stand in opposition to the way of the Law. Instead of attaining the kingdom of God by keeping the Law and its ceremonies, a person enters the kingdom by being born again through water and the Spirit.

Is it any wonder Nicodemus was confused? More to the point: he was incredulous! He was thinking of a natural birth. Preposterous! There's no climbing back into your mother once you've been born! But, being born again according to the flesh has nothing to do with the kingdom of heaven; rebirth *from above* is what's necessary.

I can just see Nicodemus shaking his head. How can these things be? And it's the right question. A birth by water and the Spirit makes no sense to those who are outside the kingdom of heaven.

Unbelievers look at us from the outside and marvel at the rites of passage in the Christian Church. Think about Holy Baptism and the ceremony connected with it. The sign of the cross marks a person as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. A white garment is placed over the candidate as a testimony of the new birth from above. A candle is lighted and given as a witness to the light of Christ. Hands are laid on the child. Prayers are said. All kinds of beautiful actions surround the proclamation of the Word and the application of the water. Funerals are similar to baptisms. Candles, the pall covering the casket, a remembrance of baptism, and the promise of the Word which declares that the departed child of God will rise from the dead to inherit the kingdom promised him from the foundation of the world.

Churchly rites of passage are designed to stimulate our eyes because we can't see doctrine. We *pray* doctrine, we *read* doctrine, we *study* doctrine, and we *preach* doctrine, but we can't *see* doctrine. Ceremonies don't create extra blessings. Rather, they proclaim that what goes on in God's House transcends everything that our minds can conjure up concerning our life in Christ. Just as we don't go chasing after the wind to see where it comes or goes, so it is with the work of God through His Word. We see the Word in action through ceremony, be it simple things like standing, sitting, speaking, or singing, or more beautiful things like vestments, candles, crosses, and incense.

Despite his religious training, Nicodemus didn't understand the complexity of the work of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Neither do we – not really. We don't confess in the Creed: I *understand* one God. We confess: I *believe* in one God. These things are mysteries. The holy writers themselves didn't understand everything God instructed them to write. These men wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit, who led them to write the Good News of God's work of salvation on our behalf. Jesus doesn't call us to understand everything; He calls us to believe what He tells us. "If I have told you earthly



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things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" Is He scolding Nicodemus with these words? No, He's teaching him. He's teaching him to lay his understanding aside and have faith.

Jesus teaches us to believe heavenly things, as well. As today's Collect says, "[He] has given us grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith and to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty." St. Paul puts it this way in Romans 11: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" No one here – not even pastors – will ever discern the inner workings of the Holy Trinity. No one knows the mind of the Lord except the Lord Himself. And what He reveals to us we believe.

The most important revelation God gives us is His only-begotten Son, Jesus. In Christ, we receive the grace to acknowledge the glory of the Trinity and worship the Unity of the Divine Majesty. This grace from above is revealed in God's Holy Word. His Word reveals how mankind is saved through His loving promise of salvation in Jesus. Our Father's undeserved love toward us is something we can never fully understand. It's something we believe by faith. It's truly impossible for our fragile human minds to decipher the code of salvation enacted by the Father's love for His creation; the Son's obedience to His Father's will, suffering bitter pain and death on the cross for our sins and rising from the dead for our justification; and the Holy Spirit's revelation of both the Father and the Son through the Means of Grace: Preaching, Baptism, Absolution, and Holy Communion. But through these Holy acts, we receive God's love, mercy, and grace.

God wants us never to doubt that He loves us and forgives our sins. When we look outside the scope of His Holy Things, we receive mixed signals leading to confusion. If Nicodemus had continued looking for God's mercy in keeping His Law and all the attending ceremonies of that Law, he could never have believed the heavenly things Jesus longed to give him. We might consider Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus as a much needed refocusing of priorities. In other words, Jesus screwed Nicodemus' head on straight so he could focus on the Giver of every good and perfect gift that comes from above. That's exactly what God does for us in the Divine Service every week. He gives us a much needed refocusing of priorities. Beloved, this is the one thing needful: The treasure trove of God's Gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Silver and gold, fame and fortune – they're nothing compared to the goods and services of heaven. For, when they're infused with the Word and Spirit of God, simple speech, water, bread, and wine serve up the joy that can't be found in anything of this earth. Blessed indeed be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity. Let us give glory to Him because He has lavished His mercy on us. In the Name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.