

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, May 31, 2015)

Text: John 3:1-17 (The Inclusive Bible)

A certain Pharisee named Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, came to Jesus at night. "Rabbi," he said, "we know you're a teacher come from God, for no one can perform the signs and wonders you do, unless by the power of God."

Jesus gave Nicodemus this answer:

"The truth of the matter is, unless one is born from above, one cannot see the kingdom of God"

Nicodemus said, "How can an adult be born a second time? I can't go back into my mother's womb to be born again!"

Jesus replied: "The truth of the matter is, no one can enter God's kingdom without being born of water and the Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit is Spirit. So don't be surprised when I tell you that you must be born from above. The wind blows where it will. You hear the sound it makes, but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

"How can this be possible?" asked Nicodemus.

Jesus replied, "You're a teacher of Israel, and you still don't understand these matters? The truth of the matter is, we're talking about what we know; we're testifying about what we've seen—yet you don't accept our testimony. If you don't believe when I tell you about earthly things, how will you believe when I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the One who came down from heaven—the Chosen One.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Chosen One must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in the Chosen One might have eternal life. For God so loved the world as to give the Only Begotten One, that whoever believes may not die, but have eternal life.

God sent the Only Begotten into the world not to condemn the world, but that through the Only Begotten the world might be saved.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: "The Mystery Continues"

In looking at our text for today and what Rev. Porter Taylor calls an encounter with Jesus and "Nic-at-Nite," I must agree with our UCC theologian, Kate Huey, when she notes in her reflections this week that, "It's hard to know exactly how to read this text, and which tone of voice to use. Is Nicodemus argumentative or sincerely questioning?" she asks, "Is he in awe of Jesus and drawn to him, or just flattering him in order to find a weakness, somewhere, anywhere, in his teachings? Do the answers from Jesus anger him, or perplex him, or lead him to new life?"

And, really, isn't it always this way when dealing with our scriptural texts? Don't we, as Nicodemus all those years ago, peer into Jesus' life and teachings and wonder just what it is that Jesus is working to get across to us? Nic, I think, actually had it a bit easier in a way since he was getting it straight from the source and didn't have to deal with the layers and layers between Christ's words and the ways they have been handed down to us over the centuries. Although Nicodemus heard Christ through the layer of physical darkness, we hear his words through layers and layers of theological darkness, albeit with some bursts of great light.

I think Jesus continues to teach and guide in the same way He did when he walked this earth so that we, like Nicodemus and the disciples, are left to ponder and probe and discuss together what it is He meant by the words he used and the ways in which he lived his earthly life and gave it completely to God.

Jesus, as His Abba and the comforter he sent to us known as the Holy Spirit, also seem to love mystery and to teach and challenge through the many different ways in which God is known to us. Can I be fully known, we hear God asking? When probed my Moses on this point early on in Exodus, God responds with the cryptic phrase, "I Am Who I Am." Well, that clears that up, doesn't it?

When we think we fully know something or believe we "have it down," we tend to lose interest in the quest. Working as a legal assistant for many years to support my acting habit, I would be absolutely enthralled at the beginning of each new job as I learned the ins and outs of the work set before me, only to be completely bored and nearly catatonic as the days turned into months and then into years as I realized that the work held no mystery or challenge for me after I figured out the tasks and was then doomed to repeat them day after endless day.

You can see this same type of thought and behavior from people who feel they have somehow figured out God and what God wants for our lives by reading the scriptures literally (as if this were possible to do) and marking their life sheets with little victory marks to indicate that they are certain they're doing exactly what God wants them to do. This kind of approach to the Christian life is antithetical to the living and breathing Christ I see moving and teaching through the gospels and the God that is still speaking to us this very day and in this very moment.

"The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit... If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

Christ, it would seem, is speaking about the mystery of being in, with and of God in much the same way the mystery of the Trinity exists within Christendom. How can three be one? Or, pertinent to today's text, how can we be both made of water and of the spirit?

The Trinity, expressed historically as the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, can also be seen as humanity wrestling with the nature of our God who will not be contained in any one understanding or singular manifestation. This is a God who is too big and too broad for our limited understanding. This is our God who wants to parent us, befriend us, guide us, be with us in ways we CAN understand AND in ways we can't.

"The Trinity points to the mystery of unity and diversity in God's experience and in the ongoing creative process," Dr. Bruce Epperly wrote in an essay reflecting on Trinity Sunday. "God is not an unchanging monad, but a lively dancing, creating, and relating being [who is] becoming, constantly growing, evolving, and inspiring. The Trinity is not segmented or digital but a holistic reality in which each one of the "many" experiences and acts in relationship to the other."

I think the trinity is about balance and confluence and the outpouring of love that is too vast to put limitations upon it. The trinity is about joining together and being one with separate parts. Much as Paul in his letters exhorts the church that we are many members, but one body, so the Triune God provides balance and stability with its differing aspects of the Godhead and the way in which we are to love one another as God loves us.

"...at the heart of our understanding of God as somehow three-in-one is the notion that you can't fully or finally understand God without talking about relationship," Dr. David L öse, whom I had the great privilege of hearing at my conference a couple weeks ago, writes. "That God is so full of love that there has to be some way of talking about that loved shared in and through profound relationships. 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 that is at the heart of God's identity and character can only be captured – and that dimly! – by thinking of the love that is shared... 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."

How sad then to realize that many take the most well known of all verses that capped our reading for today beginning with "God so loved the world..." and have used it as a way to condemn those who do not believe in Jesus, who, you will remember, is only one aspect of the Triune God.

"Unfortunately, for many," Kate Huey writes, "the words, "For God so loved the world," rather than reassuring us of the depth of God's love for the world, impose a requirement of intellectual assent ([or] "belief") in order to "have eternal life," or, as we might say, to "be saved." That requirement draws a line between the "saved" and the "unsaved," as if salvation could be so simple."

I was intrigued myself as I read over the whole of this text again and again this week and realized that the words Jesus speaks to Nicodemus could even be interpreted as saying that anyone can enter the kingdom of God since we could say that everyone is born by water and the Spirit otherwise, how else could we be these creatures of flesh and soul that we are?

Perhaps being born of the Spirit is actually to be awakened to the Spirit of God that is already alive and aching to flourish within each one of us. Perhaps Jesus is wanting us to grow our Spirit in the same way our flesh grows and matures and realizes its oneness with all of life and the way it never truly dies but is transformed into another source of energy, of "Godness."

If we are truly awakened to God's spirit within us and the realization that all aspects of God are at work within us and within the world, how does that change how we see ourselves in the world and in relationship to God and to one another?

Does it mean that we live our lives in anxiety and fear, wondering when the next shoe will drop? Or does it mean that we live our lives in constant connection, knowing that whatever comes our way, God will be with us to reveal the depth of God's love for us and for all those around us, indeed for all of creation?

Does it mean that we risk the unknown, try something we haven't tried before and maybe, just maybe live into the full realization that we are not condemned but loved beyond all understanding and with everything that our God is in every manifestation?

Awesome, wondrous God,
dark, deep, and holy One,
we come to feel the mystery of your name.

Green growing God,
Christ of many stories and disciples,
we come to hear the parable of your love.

Bright, flashing God,
blowing wind and Holy Spirit,
we come to speak the gospel of your fire.

Distant yet intimate God,
woven, puzzled, grained by time,
we come to find the Trinity of your grace.

(Maren C. Tirabassi)

Amen.