

Trinity Sunday

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Date: 31 May 2015

Preacher: Rev. George Sinclair

[0 : 00] Father God, with this creed before us, we confess to you that we don't always understand who you are. We don't always understand your three persons in one.

Father God, would you open our eyes to see who you are, to see who you are as Father, to see who you are as Son and who you are as Holy Spirit. Father, you're here with us this morning. We ask that you would show yourself to us. Amen. Please be seated. When I was in school at the University of Ottawa, I had a favorite professor.

He taught mechanical engineering. And his specialty, the thing that he researched, the thing that he spent all his time doing when he wasn't hanging out with students, was studying fuel combustion. That was his thing. He burned things. And if you went into his lab, you would see big equipment. And all that equipment did was burn things. And every student of his, who was even just a little bit of a peromaniac, loved having him.

[1 : 12] Because whenever there was a chance for a demonstration that had anything to do with burning something, he would come to class with his demo equipment to make fireballs, to make explosions, to blow little fuel droplets into the air to burn, and things like that.

Basically, whatever you'd expect from a professor who studies combustion. He did it in class. It was great. However, one day, one day, instead of his burning demo equipment, he brought a big fat stack of paper in a folder.

That was his demonstration for the day. Instead of burning equipment, inside that folder were plans, were schematics, were drawings, were instructions for all manner of machines and gadgets that were supposed to be perpetual motion machines, machines that never would stop.

Never would stop. People would just sort of walk into the university, bring these into his office, and show him, and ask him to verify that they really did work. And in 30-odd years of teaching, he still had yet to find one, believe it or not, that worked.

Our assignment that day was to sit down, each with a plan, and to figure out why each one didn't work. To debunk why each scheme wouldn't work. I got to meet one of these crackpots one day.

[2 : 37] I was working in a machine lab. I had a bunch of stuff in front of me, and this fellow just sort of walked in out of nowhere and just started talking. And he was a nice enough guy.

He was a nice enough guy. He was quite pleasant to talk to. He knew his engineering history. And he was quite practical. He knew how to put things together. And he told a good story.

But what he did not have, however, was an understanding of the fundamentals of thermodynamics. The fundamentals that would tell you that you can't build a perpetual motion machine. One that will work forever.

And I can only just imagine that Nicodemus must have felt something similar, going to see Jesus as a professor would feel, coming with plans and documents that clearly aren't going to work.

Nicodemus the Pharisee, member of a ruling council. He was well-educated. He was smart. He was probably wise. He was certainly well-respected among his peers.

[3 : 36] He probably had a tremendous amount of influence among Jews. Maybe he even had a few Roman contacts in the government. Jesus was just some upstart preacher from Galilee, from Hicktown nowhere.

No training, no contacts, not even any sort of noble birth to get him started. Nicodemus probably felt like my professor talking to one of these crackpots.

He probably felt like he was beneath him to talk to Jesus, to talk to this upstart preacher. Just like my professor probably could have sent any one of us students to talk to these crackpot inventors, Nicodemus probably felt like he could have just sent a student to deal with Jesus.

Send a student to straighten out this upstart and move on. But, Nicodemus is there in person and if you have your Bible, open it up will you to John chapter 3.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and he said to him, Rabbi, we know that you're a teacher come from God.

[4 : 47] We know that you're a teacher come from God for no one can do these signs, these miracles that you do unless God is with him. Nicodemus is there in person.

He's there under the cover of night quite possibly to hide the fact that he's there at all. And that's because there's a problem. He's there because there's a problem. Just as if my professor found among that giant stack of papers a machine that actually did work, a machine that actually did work forever, Nicodemus has found a crackpot preacher with God's power.

And that's troubling. That's troubling. You see, Nicodemus is a good Jew. Being a Pharisee, he's zealous for holiness. He's zealous for the law. He follows the customs of his people.

He follows the traditions of his people. He has stature. He has respect. But Nicodemus does not have power from God. And Jesus does.

This nobody from Galilee has power. So Nicodemus comes, representing himself certainly and maybe a couple of like-minded friends among the leaders of the Jews to find out what's going on.

[6 : 02] He's there alone. His friends haven't come with him. Maybe they're too chicken to ruin their reputations. Maybe they don't want a crowd walking down the street. It's a small gathering, just the two of them. And finally, they're going to speak frankly.

Finally, Nicodemus hopes he's going to finally see who Jesus is. Finally figure out what's going on. He's going to see who Jesus is. Being the in-charge fellow that he is, Nicodemus starts this conversation by just simply stating what he knows.

Stating what he knows. Let's read it from John chapter 3. Teacher, we know that you're a teacher come from God. For no one can do these signs that you do unless, unless they come from God. Unless God is with them. There you have it. That's what Nicodemus knows. That's what Nicodemus comes with. It actually seems like pretty sound logic to me.

It tells us that Nicodemus knows something about God. He knows that God is not a magical force that you can control. He knows that God is a person. God is someone who's never coerced.

[7 : 19] Therefore, God chose to work through Jesus. This is important to know. He knows that if God chose to work through Jesus, then there's something important about Jesus. There's something important about Jesus.

And Nicodemus concludes that the important thing about Jesus is that he's a teacher. A good teacher, certainly. Maybe at best, Jesus will turn the Jews back to God.

Maybe he will turn the Jews back to God's law. That's what Nicodemus knows. That's what he sees in Jesus. And how does Nicodemus know these things? He has seen.

He has seen the signs that Jesus has done. He's seen them. Perhaps he's even seen them with his own eyes. He's seen these signs that Jesus is doing. So God is clearly with this Jesus.

I'm sure that Nicodemus thought that his statement was perfectly reasonable. And it seems so. But instead of responding with a question, maybe a clarification, Jesus simply makes another statement.

[8 : 20] And here it is from the text. John 3, verse 3. Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Let's put that up on the screen. I don't get a chance to do this very often, so put it up on the screen.

And in two sentences, this conversation starts to go off the rail. Nicodemus makes a statement and Jesus makes another statement. Okay? And in two sentences, this conversation seems to be going off the rails.

Where is it going? You see, you might even have a note in your margin of your Bible if you look carefully, stating that the words for born again might also be born from above.

Now our translators have picked one of those. Nicodemus would have heard both of those things. He would have heard born again and born from above. And he would have to guess which one Jesus meant.

[9 : 32] Nicodemus would have heard those two words and had to guess what Jesus meant. Did he just say born again? Or did he say born from above? Which did he just say? Let's put that up there. Again, I don't get to do this very often.

There we go. When I was growing up, my dad had a friend. A friend. And we used to go on these long road trip vacations every year with this couple, this man and his wife.

We traveled all over the country. We camped in all sorts of places. But thinking back, the only thing that I actually remember about this guy besides the way he looked, the only thing I remember is that he and my dad spoke almost exclusively in puns to each other.

One of my crowning achievements as a young guy, I was probably like six, one of my crowning achievements of my young life was coming up with a pun that was worthy of this conversation that these two men were having.

Some 25 years later, believe it or not, I can still remember what that pun was. My pun was funny, and if you ask me about it after the service, I'll tell you, you'll probably be disappointed.

[10:38] Jesus' pun, however, is not funny. Jesus is pointing out something very important in this conversation that Jesus is having with Nicodemus.

Nicodemus chooses one meaning. He has two meanings to choose from, or both together. He chooses one meaning, and it's the farthest from what Jesus is actually trying to say.

He takes Jesus to mean born again, born again here and now on this earth right now. Hence his question, which isn't quite a question. Let's read it from the text here.

John 3, 4. Nicodemus said to him, How can a man be born when he's old? How can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Not really a question.

Not really a question. The important thing that's betrayed by Nicodemus' answer is that he isn't looking at this situation with what we might call spiritual eyes.

[11:42] He has an earthly perspective on everything that's going on here. Remember what he's seen. He's seen miracles. He's seen signs. He has an earthly perspective of what's going on.

And this has often been Jesus' critique of Pharisees, other Pharisees certainly. They have a spiritual heritage that's second to none. They have a great grasp of the scriptures for sure.

They have tradition to back all of this up for better or worse. But they have no spiritual sight. They can't see what God is doing before them.

can't see who truly Jesus is. It's the same reason why Nicodemus mistakes Jesus for just another teacher. That brings me to my next simple point.

Unless you see Jesus for who he really is, you cannot see the kingdom of God. Let me put that on the screen here. Nicodemus has completely misjudged where Jesus is coming from.

[12:44] And so he's completely missed what he's being told here. He's being told that he doesn't just have to be born again, but he has to be born again from above as well.

I find it kind of funny that Nicodemus doesn't really even mention the second part of what Jesus said, talking about the kingdom of God in his follow-up question. We've used the term a couple of times this morning already without comment.

We regularly use the term as we see Jesus using it here and in other places in other parts of the gospel. He frequently uses it to refer to a spiritual reality that people are a part of as they come to Jesus.

Now, I can't actually know what Nicodemus would have thought of this term. There's a lot of possibilities and maybe the top two are most likely.

The term kingdom of God would have had a strong messianic association to some Jews. They would have seen it as a coming king sort of thing to say. If that's the way that Nicodemus saw it, it seems a little odd that he misses the reference completely.

[13:52] Just goes right over his head. The other strong possibility is that he would have heard it as referring to Israel as the kingdom of God. And if that's the case, it should have seemed very odd to Nicodemus that in Jesus' conversation, he's referring to Nicodemus as being outside of the kingdom of God, not being included.

Nicodemus probably had a good lineage. Why on earth would he have to be reborn to be a Jew? Why would he have to be reborn to be a better Jew? It doesn't make any sense. Why would you ever preach that to Jews?

Yet again, it seems the most earthly answer is the one that Nicodemus is using in his head. The most earthly reason.

Nicodemus doesn't see Jesus for who he is. And unless he can see Jesus for who he is, he won't be able to see the kingdom of God either. He won't be able to see this new thing that God is doing.

This new reality that's giving birth right in front of him. This new thing that's happening. Let's go back to the text. Starting at 5, let's continue reading. Jesus answers Nicodemus talking about being born again.

[15:02] 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 flesh is flesh. And that which is born of spirit is spirit.

Do not marvel that I have said to you, you must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound. Do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the spirit.

So Jesus mercifully rephrases his original statement for Nicodemus. Maybe make this a little clearer. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot come to the kingdom of God.

So to clear up the confusion, Jesus uses the terms water and spirit spirit, or water and wind, as it is in the text, instead of this again from above word.

So we're left wondering now, instead of what he meant by the first thing, what he means by water and spirit. At least we're not left wondering if there's some sort of natural birth in mind.

[16:06] At least Nicodemus isn't wondering if Jesus is that sort of crank anymore. The problem is that it's not a matter of natural rebirth. earth. We're talking about then, if it's not natural water and wind, we're talking about water and spirit from above.

And this starts to remind me a little bit of the Samaritan lady who Jesus runs into when he and his disciples are traveling through Samaria. In fact, the story comes nearly directly after this one, so if you get curious later, you can just turn the page and read it.

Jesus offers this woman sitting at the well living water that will quench her thirst forever. It's a fantastic story.

And do you remember her response? Living water that will quench her thirst forever. And she says, yeah, please give me that water. I don't want to come back to this well every day. And I always thought that was a funny answer.

Funny, mostly because it sounded like, I don't know, something my mom would say when we would complain about chores that we had to do. However, it's the same earthly vision, the same earthly thinking that Nicodemus is showing.

[17:19] So Jesus goes on from the text, that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.

That makes it pretty clear that to be born again we're talking about spiritual rebirth. If only spirit can give birth to spirit, then that's our only chance of entering this kingdom of God that Jesus is talking about.

We can see this now, today, as a clear reference to the Holy Spirit. It's so clear that probably most of your Bibles use a capital S on spirit.

George said Holy Spirit directly when he was reading it. It's clear from this that unless you see the Holy Spirit for who he is, you cannot see the kingdom of God.

that's just one more point. It's the Holy Spirit who fills us with life everlasting. It's the Holy Spirit who regenerates our broken spirits, our spirits that have been broken in years of sin.

[18:21] Without him, we cannot be part of what God is doing in eternity. He goes on to describe what it's like to be born of the spirit. This is verse 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.

Again, we see that those born of the spirit have a direction that can't be seen with earthly eyes. It can't be seen from an earthly's perspective. The work of the spirit goes unseen when all you have is an earthly perspective.

Think, for example, of Jesus himself and his own work. He was born of the spirit. Early in his ministry he was baptized and the spirit came down on him.

He was born of the spirit. And remember that the spirit pushed him onward to Jerusalem to die. His purpose was real and his purpose was clear to him.

[19:32] People couldn't see it from the outside. Even when he talked to them about it, it was hard for them to see. But to Jesus his purpose was clear and it was real but invisible.

But Nicodemus sees just signs in Jesus' life. He doesn't see that clear, real purpose which is portrayed so well in the Gospel of Luke as we've been reading.

Nicodemus just doesn't see it. He sees just signs. Jesus' purpose is huge. Jesus' purpose is glorious. Jesus is working on a scale bigger than anything that we've ever seen before. And Nicodemus sees the very tip. He sees miracles. That's what he's seeing. Just some signs. He must be a good teacher because I see some signs. Nicodemus sees neither Jesus nor does he see the work of the Holy Spirit.

He doesn't see either one for who they are. And so he can neither see the kingdom of God that's about to be born.

[20 : 39] So here's Nicodemus' answer to everything that Jesus has just said. You ready? This is verse 9. How can these things be? That's it. How can these things be?

There you go. Nicodemus can't see it. He started off not being able to see who Jesus is and he still can't. Now in a move that's very unusual for Jesus he continues to explain himself to someone who's already tuned out, who's already lost the plot.

He's about to state his purpose and identity more clearly than he does for most people in the Gospels. He's about to show Nicodemus who he is, who Jesus himself sees himself to be.

Nicodemus can't see it. Nicodemus can't see who Jesus is, but he's about to state it. Let's continue reading, starting at verse 10. How can these things be?

He said. Jesus answered him, Are you a teacher of Israel and yet do you not understand these things? He's implying you should be able to see these things reading the Old Testament. Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, we bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.

[22 : 02] You do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things, things that are happening here and now, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

He's saying, you haven't been able to see who I am and you haven't been able to see who the Holy Spirit is and you haven't been able to recognize the work that either of us are doing. You haven't been able to see what we're doing here on earth.

You haven't been able to see the kingdom. How can I ever describe to you what things will look like in the end? Where this kingdom is actually going? And here it is. Here's Jesus' grand statement.

Here's who Jesus himself sees himself to be. You ready? Starting at verse 13. No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

That's a self-reference. And as Jesus 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. for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

[23 : 10] That's who Jesus sees in himself, the one descended from heaven, the one who will be lifted up. Jesus has descended from heaven, the very Son of the Father, not confused in their persons, as we said earlier, but also not divided in their substance.

He has descended to earth only to be lifted up on a cross and further to be lifted up on high so that we can be born again of God's Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit sent from the Father to us by Jesus' will.

Again, not confused in their persons and not divided in their substance. Our good news this morning is that our God is three persons, that's good news, all three working together for our salvation.

It's something we don't deserve, three gods in one person, one single God rescuing us. Our good news is summed up so well in these words that we just read.

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

[24 : 32] Let's pray. Father, would you help us to see you clearly? Would you teach us who you are? Would you teach us who Jesus is, Father?

Father, Father, we love you and we thank you that you revealed yourself to us in three persons. Father, we thank you that we are not completely ignorant as to who you are and what you look like. Father, we thank you for this unmerited favor and this grace that you show us. Father, we thank you and we pray these things in the name of Jesus who came to earth to save us.

Amen.