

“Nicodemus the Seeker”

John 3:1-17

May 26, 2024 – Trinity Sunday

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At heart, I am a left-brain, rationalist who likes to solve problems and find solutions, and so the language of mystery bothers me. It suggests that there are just some things in life that we have not and furthermore will not figure out. It bothers us because we are so advanced technologically and scientifically; everyday new marvels and discoveries unfold for our benefit. We think that there really is nothing unsolvable.

I wanted to push this concept of mystery with my science son, David who has a degree in biochemistry. I asked him about the theory of the atom. I said, “David, tell me a little bit about atomic theory. What is life like inside of the nucleus of an atom?” “There is no life in there,” he said, spoken with certainty. “So, what is it like?” I asked. “Well, the nucleus of an atom is a dense place – kind of like you, Dad – with all the protons and neutrons, bound tightly together.”

“What are they made of?” I pondered. He said, “Something called quarks.” “And what are they made of? How far down does it go?” “Well,” he said, “one theory is that the composition of protons and neutrons might have something to do with string theory, but that idea is being contested.” “So, I guess it’s a mystery.” To which my rational scientist son agreed. Even scientists face the conundrum of mystery, and mysteries – scientific or divine – are meant to be explored.

Today is the one Sunday in the Christian calendar that is focused on a doctrine, a teaching of the church. It’s called Trinity Sunday, and it’s focus is on how we speak about God. We say that God is one in being, but is Three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Some of us might want to call that a mystery and get on to coffee hour. But at its heart it says something about the nature of the mystery we call God and about life, the life we are meant to live. This God we call Trinity is a lot different than what others have thought. Some have thought of God as great lawmaker, a tough judge, or a transcendent utterly distant monarch who winds the creation up like a clock and leaves it alone to go its own way. But to call God Trinity is to say something completely different. Trinity says that God is a communion of persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - who dwell together from all eternity in a fellowship of deep and abiding love and self-giving. God is not some singular unity, alone, detached, and far away, but God is, and has always been a loving communion of three persons.

Now that is a mystery that begs to be explored. And that brings us to Nicodemus. Nicodemus is troubled. He is bothered by his questions. He’s like any minister I’ve known. Questions, and not all religious ones. If you could start over again, would you have gone into the ministry? Did I negotiate my terms of call right? Maybe I should have been an Episcopalian. At least when the sermon bombs, they’ve got beautiful liturgy! I should have read Karl Barth more! Was this church the right fit for me?

We all have wondered if we could have led our lives differently. I bet you’ve ruminated about that too. And then you try to create a whole new life, “I’ll exercise more, read the right self-help books, get organized, maintain a daily do-list, be more loving to the people around me.” All good resolutions. You start out well, but the plan doesn’t succeed. And even when we have done it alright and got it all together, there’s something nagging at us on the inside that says something is missing.

Nicodemus is us. He has played the game in his system right. He’s a devout student of the Hebrew scriptures, a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council. In his world, he’s got a great life. But something is missing. He’s got questions. Lots of them. And then he does something about those questions. The text says, “He came to Jesus ...” That’s a good place to start when you’re seeking answers.

It's been a long day for Jesus and his disciples. It's late, and Jesus and the disciples are relaxing. Nicodemus shows up, somewhat shy about being there so late, and so he eases into a conversation with Jesus with a little bit of flattery. "I know that you are a teacher sent from God because nobody can do the things you do without God's presence in your life." Behind those words you can hear his deep longing: You have God in your life. I want God in my life too. What do I need to do?"

Jesus' response totally confuses Nicodemus. "You don't need God in your life. It's the other way around: you need to enter God's life. And this is a gift God offers you. You need to be in the life of God.(1) And to do that, Nicodemus, you have to be born all over again, into God's life." That's not the answer Nicodemus was expecting. "What do you mean — being born from above. I'm an old man. How do I start all over again? I've lived my life. Besides I can't crawl back into my mother's womb and emerge shiny and new. I don't know how to do that." "Of course, you don't, Nicodemus. It's a gift. To receive new life is not something you work for or achieve. It's not something you add to your "do-list" or one more thing to chalk up on your resume. In fact, this life has come to you. This life is standing right here in front of you, with you now, talking and speaking to you. You aren't here by accident. It's the very Spirit calling you to that life."

Now pause for a moment, and let's return to the Trinity. What is that life? It is the passionate life of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a life that flows within God and has been poured out in Jesus, and that God shares with us. God so loved the world that God has given God's only Son, to save the world. God doesn't give this life to condemn the world, but to save it. God has given us a Son, as a way into the very life of God. When we baptize children or adults, we don't baptize them only in the name of Jesus, but in the name of the Trinity. They become born into a new way of life, God's life, a life of love, self-giving, sharing, a life shared within the Trinity and given to us.

It still sounds like a mystery to me, and it grates against my need to organize life, as a project I need to achieve, something I need to do. But the life God wants to give us is not a life we accomplish. It's not about knowing new things. It is given to us by the Spirit. Every now and then, here and there, in the world you see this life at work, and the mystery becomes a little clearer. We have all known people from very similar circumstances. On the one hand there are those who feel burned-out, depressed, and who find every challenge a burden, who feel that life is an oppressive weight upon their shoulders. On the other hand, there are people who experience hardship and challenge, but find in those challenges a joy for living and hope each day, and they are most grateful, even in the midst of difficulty. Can you explain that?

I think the difference between the two lies in the hope of being born from above, about receiving the gift of life that is God's life to give. (2) The very longing in our hearts to be filled with what is missing in our lives is God's very Spirit blowing through our lives to share with us God's life. And the best thing we can do in those aching moments when we feel life lacks joy or purpose is to pray, "God, help me to be born from above."

Let us pray: O God, we praise you. Through Word and Spirit you created your world. In Jesus Christ you share with us your very life you enjoy from all eternity. So come now, Holy Spirit, so that in all of our striving for life, we may be led to you, the Life that is life indeed. Amen.

- 1) This idea is from Tom Long's sermon, "The Start of the Trail," https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003135/the_start_of_the_trail
- 2) Feasting on the Word: the Gospel of John, vol.1, Brett Younger, p.61.