

**Sunday, May 31, 2015**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “Three in One”**

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Today is the Sunday that the church has designated as ‘Trinity Sunday.’

Jesus never spoke specifically about the triune nature of God.

Third century religious scholar Tertullian is credited with laying the foundation for the doctrine of the Trinity by arguing that the Old and New Testament Gods were one.

Augustine, writing in the fourth century further developed the theory of unity of God arguing that the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are co-equal in eternity.

He places particular emphasis on the Holy Spirit, identifying the Spirit as love.

The Spirit, argues Augustine, is the divine gift which binds us to God.

In 325 Constantine convened the Council of Nicea where the Nicene Creed, an adaptation of the earlier Apostles’ Creed was adopted, institutionalizing the Trinity in the Christian church.

From the beginning of the church leaders attempted to develop language and concepts that would help followers to understand God and God’s relation to humanity.

Following Jesus’ example, questions were welcomed and thoughtfully answered.

While we might not fully understand the concept of a triune God, we accept that this is true because we have experienced God’s presence in these different ways.

God as creator, redeemer and sustainer.

We live in the mystery.

Our life with God is based on trust – on faith in things unseen.

“How can these things be?” asks Nicodemus in today’s passage.

Nicodemus comes from a world where all is ordered.

Behaviors, beliefs, relationships – all follow a strict code.

But he senses a change.

There is something about this young man, Jesus, that draws Nicodemus out of the safety of his home, into the streets at night, to seek answers.

He wants to know more than he has been told – where do these miracles come from?

How often do we struggle with our own doubts and questions in the dark of night?

How often do we lay awake wondering, “How can these things be?”

Nicodemus struggles to process Jesus’ answers to his questions because they force him outside of his way of thinking – his way of being.

Jesus’ message is really quite simple – allow the good news of God’s gift of his son to permeate your being and you will be granted eternal life – life in the light.

Nicodemus keeps trying to fit Jesus’ answers into his frame of mind.

It won’t fit.

Square peg in a round hole.

Jesus prods him to open up and understand that “God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

There is a certain irony in the fact that the words Jesus uses to get the religiously righteous Nicodemus not to take things literally is often interpreted literally by those who maintain that this passage excludes people from God’s grace.

We have an explanation of what God did and is doing, loving and saving the world, turned into something WE do.

We, however, cannot command or control God’s grace.

Being born again is the work of the Spirit.

Whether it happens suddenly or gradually, we can't make it happen, either by strong desire and determination or by learning and believing the right beliefs.

But we can be intentional about being born again.

Being born again is the turning from a self-centered life to a God-centered life.

Whether that happens just once, or over a period of a lifetime, it is the work of the holy spirit bringing God’s grace into our lives.

We can remain open to the Spirit’s transformative power.

We can follow where God leads.

When Nicodemus struggles, Jesus assures him that he can indeed be transformed, born again.

An abstract idea that Nicodemus takes literally.

Jesus persists and we have to assume that Nicodemus does finally get the message because we know he shows up twice more in John's gospel to defend Jesus and to lovingly prepare his body for burial after the crucifixion.

This passage provides us with at least three important lessons.

The first is that God is ever creating.

We have an opportunity to be born again, and again and again.

We can start anew – transform ourselves into better people.

God's grace is ongoing and supports us in these transformative efforts.

Our faith journey is one of continually exploring God's power in our lives.

We are reminded over and over again that our God is a God of wonder, greater than our imaginations can ever comprehend.

Our faith is real, but is infused with mystery, awe and beauty.

I do not believe that you can live through the spring – watching leaves flourish and flowers bloom without acknowledging that there is a force in the world greater than yourself.

Of course science can explain how the leaves are generated –but understanding the process does not diminish the wonder that it happens.

Flowers, birds, breezes, goodness, kindness –these are all God's gifts to the world.

We must be conscious of these things, aware of the many ways God's love permeates our lives.

In a posting this week Yale Divinity Professor Miroslav Volf wrote:

“Consider an ordinary object—a pen, for instance. You might think it's a mere material thing. It's not. In feeling my gold-nibbed Pelikan fountain pen between my fingers, I don't just touch an object, I relate to my father, who gave it to me. If you listen carefully, a simple pen will tell you that most things we encounter aren't just things; they are also social relations. What matters most for pleasure isn't the object “as it appears to our senses” but an experience of the object as a thing that is also a particular relationship to other persons. To put it in theological language, we enjoy things the most when we experience them as sacraments—as carriers of the presence of another.

Now think of the world as a gift (he continues)—the entirety of it and all individual things in it. If the world is a gift, then all things to which you relate—and many to which you don't—are also God's relation to you.

Finally, imagine that you feel a bond to the giver of the gift that is the world.

Each thing in the world is now a relationship marked by love.

Each distant star and every gentle touch, each face and every whiff of the freshly plowed earth, in sum, literally every good and beautiful thing shimmers with an aura both vibrantly real and undetectable to our five senses.

Each thing in the world is more than itself and just so a source of deep and many-layered pleasure.”

The second is that Jesus invites us to question our faith.

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asks.

We spend our lives searching, questioning – it is why we come together in community.

The third message in today’s passage is the promise of eternal life.

Our earthly journey is not the end of our relationship with God.

There is more.

This is the divine promise that we most often neglect to remember.

We spend much of our lives afraid of death – running away from things that remind us that we are mortal.

However, one of the great mysteries of life is death.

What happens when we die?

Of course we don’t have any Nicodemus-proof evidence to describe what happens, but we do have Jesus’ words ‘so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.’

Eternal life is the promise that love does not cease.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans he writes with assurance: Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We are a people of promise.

A people of hope.

God’s grace is abundant and available to every created being.

We don’t have to sneak around at night to find our spiritual grounding.

As part of this faith community, next week we will renew our covenant with one another, pledging our mutual support as we explore our beliefs, examine our values and commit ourselves to grace-filled lives.

Our youth deacon, Jack Patterson, couldn't make it to our monthly meeting last Tuesday. As lead deacon for the month he was charged with providing the opening prayer. He wrote the following prayer and sent it to us. It sums up Jesus' lesson for Nicodemus this morning. With Jack's permission, I share this with you:

God, the world we live in is a broken one.

Sometime, our world's brokenness overwhelms us;

The sheer mass of the wrong blinds us from seeing the good, or what could be good.

All too often, we forget that we are a people of hope.

In doing so, we fail to recognize – we fail to believe in—the beauty and power of the message we are charged with sharing.

O God, no matter how gray our world may at times appear to be, aid us in never losing sight of our faith's ultimate goal: To build the kingdom here on earth, to be overflowing springs of good, to change the world. Amen.