

Trinity in Action: Love That Sends

John 3:1-17

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Martin Luther once said: To deny the Trinity endangers your salvation, to try to comprehend the Trinity endangers your sanity (may be finding this to be the case with this series!). Well, beginning today with our text from John 3, for a few weeks, I want to look at the Triune God as he is on display in His actions for your salvation. That is, we will contemplate God, not so much as he is in himself, but as he is toward us in His works. Call these next few sermons, if you like, Trinitarianism made easier, made accessible.

To Luther's remark, I hope we can gain some comprehension of the Trinity as our Savior AND leave your sanity intact! (strengthen and deepen your sanity). We shall make three points: The work of the Holy Spirit in vv. 1-12. The work of the Son in vv. 13-15, and the work of the Father in verses 16 and 17.

I. The Work of the Holy Spirit

First, then, the work of the Holy Spirit. John chapter 3 v.1: There was a MAN of the Pharisees named Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, and thus a good Torah observing Jew, but he was still "a man." The end of v.1 says: he was a member of the Jewish ruling council, which means he probably belonged to the Sanhedrin. This is a man of some learning and public notoriety. He comes to Jesus at night. He calls Jesus 'Rabbi' and says, "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with Him." Nicodemus gets the connection between the signs and Jesus' divine teaching mission. He does not yet grasp who Jesus is. But while he is lacking understanding, he is not blinded by prejudice as some others were.

Nevertheless, Nicodemus does not know what he is wading into here. For him, this is simply a discussion between two teachers, two rabbis. And Jesus, not much for small talk, dispenses with the preliminaries in v.3. He starts with "I tell you the truth." It is a solemn declaration.

Conversations with Jesus are never casual chats. He always ups the ante. He turns simple requests into moments of crisis and personal decision. He presses

his claims upon men. So, he says, solemnly, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. "Born again" here is the same as born from above.

It is critical to recognize that the topic here is birth. Birth status was the single, all-important factor, in determining a person's honor or social standing in this world. And Nicodemus is a man who, however he was born, has attained the status of one well-born. Social honor, derived from one's status at birth, was simply a given. To be born over again, however unthinkable that event might be, would alter one's status in a very fundamental way. A new status would derive from a new birth.

So Jesus goes right for the jugular here. Deducing that I am a teacher from God because of the signs is woefully inadequate. Being a devout adherent of the Law, and a respected teacher yourself, is utterly impotent in the face of what man is. What is required is nothing less radical than a new birth. And without such a rebirth one cannot see the Kingdom of God. The kingdom is the realm of God's life. The dynamic reign of God in the midst of His people. Or, as Paul puts it: the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. And rebirth from above, that is, from the divine life of God himself, from heaven, is needed to enter this kingdom.

On top of the birth imagery, Nicodemus would have likely thought of the kingdom as a future reality, which all the righteous Jews would enter in the age to come. Yet, Jesus speaks of a kingdom to be entered here and now. Thus, in v.4, we see that Nicodemus is bewildered. You can sympathize with him. It seems basic to Jesus' teaching method (sometime) to disorient, to unnerve, before he eventually, in his own good time, he leads us into the truth. Thus, he is often speaking indirectly, cryptically, in ways intended to provoke us into re-evaluating our most basic assumptions.

So, disoriented Nicodemus takes Jesus literally. How can a man be born when he is old? Surely, he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born? The concept presented by Christ here is so strange and inaccessible Nicodemus has no tools to grasp it. Maybe a convert to Judaism from paganism could be spoken of as a new-born child, but how could one born a Jew need rebirth? Are not Jews born as God's chosen ones. Jesus, in v.5 repeats Himself: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the KOG unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

The big question is what does Jesus mean by being born of water and the Spirit? There are a number of possible allusions here. Water could refer to John the Baptists' baptism of repentance in water. John said, "I baptize in water but after me comes One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit." It could be an allusion to natural birth. There is evidence that the Jews associated water with childbirth. Or there could be an allusion here (probably is) to Christian baptism, where water and the Holy Spirit work in conjunction. But we don't need to choose one of

these. More likely “water and the Spirit” is a way of saying you need to be cleansed or washed by the Holy Spirit.

The key background for our Lord’s utterance here comes from Ezekiel 36:25, where the prophet says:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

The prophet foretells the coming of the new covenant in terms of water and the Spirit. The restoration of Israel means they are washed, and the law of God is written into their hearts by the Spirit. That is rebirth in water and Spirit. And it is utterly necessary because we see in v.6: flesh gives birth to flesh. Flesh can give you good genes, nice social connections, and a host of other gifts, but it is still flesh. It pertains only to this fallen, passing age. It cannot bring the rebirth necessary to enter the kingdom. But, we see at the end of v.6, the Spirit gives birth to S/spirit. Jesus is simply saying like begets like, and only the Spirit, who is Himself the coming of the power of the new age, only the Spirit can bring the kingdom.

The Spirit then, is, as the Creed puts it: the Lord and giver of LIFE. Not only that, he is the Lord and giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. That is, the gift of the Spirit IS the gift of the Trinitarian life of God himself. Both the kingdom then, and your entry into it, are wholly divine (Trinitarian) achievements. Nothing is added from the human side. This is highlighted in vv. 7 and 8 where Jesus tells Nicodemus he should not marvel or be surprised at what He has said about rebirth.

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going, so it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

The Spirit, who gives the new birth into the Kingdom, is sovereign and free. He cannot be manipulated or controlled or turned into a commodity. The Spirit’s work is hidden and mysterious like the wind, but its effects are unmistakable and evident. For He creates a people reborn by the life of God, into the life of the Kingdom.

Nicodemus asks “how can this be” in v.9. And Jesus says: You are Israel’s teacher, and do you not understand these things? This is tough love. Jesus is a demanding teacher to those who present themselves to him as teachers. Jesus thinks Nicodemus should have grasped the significance of all the washings and purifications in the OT. He should have understood Ezekiel 36. He should have

grasped, from Ezekiel 37, and the vision of the wind quickening the valley of dry bones, that Israel needs to undergo death and resurrection. He should have understood salvation through the water of Noah's flood, and the Red Sea crossing.

In v.11 Jesus assures him that he is not offering a rabbinical opinion. Jesus doesn't speculate. He doesn't footnote authorities. "We speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen." The necessity and the wind-like mystery of this new birth are something Jesus knows and speaks with absolute authority on (he has seen it and heard it in the eternal counsels of the Holy Trinity). We can see at the end of v.11 that Nicodemus and his colleagues do not receive this testimony. His ignorance is culpable ignorance – and the conversation is now about the depths of Nicodemus' soul.

Finally, there is the biting v.12: if I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? Apparently the current discourse — confusing as it is to Nicodemus — is earthly, simple and basic, compared to what Jesus could, and will later, reveal about His kingdom. And this provocative dialogue must have borne fruit for Nicodemus apparently became a disciple – and after the Crucifixion comes to bury Jesus body with 75 pounds of spices. The Spirit indeed worked with Jesus' Word to beget him from above! That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

II. The Work of the Son

Our second point is the work of the Son. Verse 13 says: No one has ever gone into heaven, except the One who came from heaven - even the Son of Man. The point is not that Jesus has ascended already, but that his origin is heaven, and thus he has access to the heavenly mysteries so baffling to Nicodemus. No one but He has the authority to speak of these things. The second half of v. 13 says Jesus has descended to reveal the kingdom as the Son of Man. Here, with the reference to the Son of Man, Jesus' favorite self-designation, and one that entails his Messiahship, and all the suffering of the servant in Isaiah, the text shifts to the work of the Son.

In v.14 we have an allusion to the incident in Numbers 21 where the Israelites who were bitten by serpents. God told Moses to make a serpent of bronze and set it up on a pole. Whoever looked upon was then healed. Jesus says: Just as Moses lifted up the serpent/snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. Notice the necessity. Even as you **MUST** be born again, even so **MUST** the Son of Man be lifted up. This is a reference to Jesus' being "lifted up" --first on the cross. In John 12 Jesus says: And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself. And there John comments: This He said signifying by what death He would die.

He ascends to heavenly glory by first ascending to the cross. v.15 says whoever believes on this lifted up Son of Man will have everlasting life. Trinitarian Life is found in union with Christ, nowhere else. There is no mysterious being born above by the Spirit, without the perfect life and atoning death of the Son. The Spirit who gives us rebirth, is the Spirit of the crucified and raised Jesus. The Spirit of Christ, the Spirit sent by the glorified Son.

III. The Work of the Father

Finally, in v.16 we see that all of this stems from the great love of the Father. The use of God here, without any qualification, refers to the Father. For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten (one and only) Son. Here, what comes into view is that eternal relation of love between the Father and the Son.

Before your rebirth in the Spirit and before the atoning work of Christ is the magnificent love of the Father for his only begotten. The One who, the Creed tells us, is begotten, not made, begotten of the Father before all worlds. And this love, which God is, is a love which gives. It is the nature (we have seen) of Trinitarian love to give freely. For the Trinity is a communion of love. And out of that communion, the Father sends the Son (in the Spirit).

Notice, that this gift is given because God so loved THE WORLD. God loves the world. The whole glorious, mangled spectacle of men and things. And He has demonstrated the love and its extent in Jesus. He does not abandon His creation. He intends to remake the world. To bring forth a new heavens and a new earth. Verse 17 makes this clear: For God, the Father, did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

The Father's purpose in sending the Son is to save the world. And that new creation is already begun in those who are born from above by the Spirit. So, the Father in infinite love gives the Son, the Son in unspeakable agony, is lifted up on the cross, and we, who look to Him in faith are gloriously born from above, resurrected, by the Spirit. Luther called this text the gospel in miniature. And it is a fully Trinitarian gospel revealed here. Your salvation is the mighty work of the life and love of the One undivided God, the Holy Trinity. The Love that Sends.

Praise God from whom all saving blessings flow. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

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