

The Spirit is the Third Person

Holy Trinity

Pastor Josh Frazee

John 3:1-17

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our God, the God of the Scriptures, is one God with three, separate, distinct persons. We have just spoken together the longest, most descriptive creed describing God, the Athanasian Creed. We used that creed because it is Holy Trinity Sunday. Today, we remember and celebrate who God is as the Triune God.

“(W)e worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance. For the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Holy Spirit is another. But the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is one: the glory coequal, the majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit: the Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, the Holy Spirit uncreated; the Father infinite, the Son infinite, the Holy Spirit infinite; the Father eternal, the Son eternal, the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet there are not three Eternals, but one Eternal, just as there are not three Uncreated or three Infinites, but one Uncreated and one Infinite...Just as we are compelled by the Christian truth to acknowledge each distinct person as God and Lord, so also are we prohibited by the catholic religion to say that there are three Gods or Lords...And in this Trinity none is before or after another; none is greater or less than another...the Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity is to be worshiped...

“...But it is also necessary or everlasting salvation that one faithfully believe the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And the Creed puts this well earlier: “The Father is not made nor created nor begotten by anyone. The Son is neither made nor created, but begotten of the Father alone. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son, neither made nor created nor begotten, but proceeding. Thus there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits.”

Our Creed makes it clear who God is as the Trinitarian God; but what about our Gospel text? All three persons are mentioned, but how does our text show how they work in unity in trinity and the trinity in unity? That is what we’ll explore this morning.

Verse 1

At the beginning of our text, we heard that there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus who went to see Jesus by night. Nicodemus, like some of the Pharisees, heard Jesus and saw what He had done, and was more positive about Jesus’ work. Nicodemus even said to Jesus, “‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.’ (And) Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”

Nicodemus rightly understood that Jesus was “come from God.” He had heard the word proclaimed by Jesus as “a teacher” and had seen “these signs” that Jesus was doing. But this was not enough. Jesus strikes down any attempt at salvation through any of Nicodemus’ works. Jesus tells him plainly: “‘unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”

Jesus, then, does not say that doing good works is bad or that studying the Law of Moses and the Ten Commandments is bad. Instead He tells Nicodemus—and us—that there is a greater doctrine: the one of being born again, the one of regeneration. Without this doctrine, all the others will do one no good.

So what does this have to do with Holy Trinity Sunday? Again, we said and we heard that God is the Trinity in Unity. That is, God is three persons united in the same goal. That goal was our salvation. God the Father, being not created nor made nor begotten, did beget the Son. He begot the Son for the purpose of saying

that He approved what Jesus was saying, doing, and would ultimately do in dying for us on the cross of Calvary.

Once Jesus died on the cross, He returned and told the apostles that He would be sending us the Holy Spirit. And that also is what we heard and said earlier: that the Holy Spirit was not made nor created nor begotten, but proceeded. He proceeded from the Father and the Son once the Son ascended into heaven. The purpose for the Spirit proceeding to us was that we might be born of Him and believe, as we hear in our next verses.

Verse 2

“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ (To which) Jesus answered, ‘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 the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.” 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.’”

What Nicodemus did not—indeed could not understand was that being born again, being regenerated the way in which Jesus was speaking could not be accomplished by any earthly means. It could not be done by going back into the womb. It could not be accomplished by any number of good works. It was a work that only the Triune God could accomplish.

God the Father certainly created us to be living, breathing physical creatures. And, at first, we had a good relationship with Him. But then we fell into sin, and we lost that right relationship. So God the Father sent His Son Jesus into the world. He begot Him for the work that He would accomplish in His earthly life, death, and resurrection. Then, once Jesus had ascended, they would send the Holy Spirit into the world. It was only through this way that anyone could be brought to faith and understanding.

None of us could understand without the working of the Triune God—or believe. Thus it was the work of the Triune God that we should not only be saved by Jesus’ sacrifice, but also that we should receive the Holy Spirit so that we might believe that we have this salvation.

Verse 3

“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses 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. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.’”

In this way God saved the world, by giving His Son to die for the world lifted up on the cross. But the way in which we receive that salvation is by believing it. That is the work of the Third Person, the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit works in us the faith to believe everything about the Triune God, especially His plan in sending His Son, true God and true man, born of Mary, to be lifted up and die for our sins. The natural man could not believe this; that is why Jesus begins that a man must be born again.

Then, as a new man, one regenerated through the washing of Holy Baptism, the Spirit works this faith into each one of us. May the Spirit continue to work this faith into your hearts and your lives, today and always: that God the Father sent His only-begotten Son to be lifted up and die for your sins, and then they sent you the Holy Spirit to keep you in that one, true faith. In Jesus' Name. Amen.