

***Born of the Spirit***  
**A Sermon on John 3:1-17**  
**Trinity Sunday**  
**May 27, 2018**

**Introduction**

People have struggled for a long time with the image of an invisible God. Atheists say that God is a fantasy, a fairy tale that adults should outgrow. Conservative Christians respond that we should simply believe. The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.

Both atheists and conservative Christians are fact fundamentalists. They believe that reality has to be reduced to empirical facts.

The Holy Spirit emerged as a way for people of faith to deal with the problem of an invisible God. Many Christians are a little unsettled by talk of the Holy Spirit. We don't really understand it. It is the weakest link in the Trinity.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It always comes the week after Pentecost. It is the lectionary's way of reminding us that we need to focus on the Holy Spirit at least two Sundays each year. Today we will explore what one of the most memorable passages in the Gospel of John has to say about the Holy Spirit and how it relates to God and Christ.

**First Move: Born from Above**

Jesus' conversation partner today is Nicodemus. John the author tells us two things about Nicodemus. First, he is a ruler of the Pharisees. He is probably a member of the Sanhedrin. It was the high court of Jerusalem, made up of 71 members, including priests, aristocrats and scribes. The Sanhedrin decided legal and religious disputes.

Second, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. He may be afraid or unwilling to come to Jesus openly during the day. He could represent a group of Judeans in the synagogues when the Gospel of John was written. They were impressed by Jesus but were unwilling to commit fully to Jesus and be baptized.

Nicodemus asks Jesus three questions. The first is more of a statement than a question: "Rabbi, we know that you have come from God a teacher; for no one is able to do these signs that you do unless God is with him." If that is rephrased as

a question, Nicodemus could be asking, “Your authority comes from God, doesn’t it?”

Jesus does not answer directly. He doesn’t say, “Yes, that is correct. That is who I am.” Or, “No, that is wrong. You do not know who I am.” Jesus is mysterious, just as God is mysterious. He gives an enigmatic answer. “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless someone might be born from above (or born again), he is not able to behold the kingdom of God.”

Today’s text has several words that have double meanings in Greek. The first one is the Greek adverb, ἄνωθεν. It can mean “from above” or “again”. There is no English word that means both “from above” and “again”. Any English translation is going to lose this double meaning. It is going to imply that one meaning is more important than the other.

Jesus is challenging Nicodemus to think about what it means to be born ἄνωθεν. Nicodemus blows past the dilemma. He interprets it as a fact fundamentalist would; to him ἄνωθεν simply means “again.”

Nicodemus is confused and asks another question. “How is an old man able to be born again? Is he able to enter into the womb of his mother a second time and to be born?”

Nicodemus is hearing the word literally and Jesus is talking metaphorically. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he is using both meanings. “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless someone is born from water and spirit, he is not able to enter into the kingdom of God.”

Born from water could be a reference to baptism, but it could also mean a normal physical birth. Nicodemus has just referred to his mother’s womb, and we know that the water breaks in woman’s womb when she gives birth. Born from the spirit refers to a spiritual birth, such as baptism. The Greek word πνεῦμα also has two meanings—it means both wind and spirit. The spirit is like the wind—it blows freely. No one knows where the wind comes from or where it is going. It creates new possibilities that go beyond conventional wisdom.

Jesus may be saying that people need to be born both physically and spiritually. He is not denying the material and saying that the spiritual is all that matters. Jesus holds the physical and the spiritual together.

Nicodemus still doesn’t understand what it means to be born from above. He asks, “How is it possible for these things to happen?”

Jesus rebukes Nicodemus. “You are the teacher of Israel and these things you do not know?” The text says, *the* teacher of Israel. Nicodemus may be the leading scribe on the Sanhedrin.

That may be getting in his way. The more education and experience people have, the more people tend to have a settled way of looking at things. The more dogmatic their theology is, the less they are willing to ask questions about their faith. They think they already know all the answers. Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist, writes in *The Righteous Mind* that people use reason to justify what they already know instead of opening themselves up to different perspectives. When they get new data, they stop listening as soon as they can connect it with what they already know. Nicodemus' education and experience is a stumbling block that keeps him from opening up fully to Jesus. He may be thinking that the most important thing is to be born as a son of Abraham.

## **Second Move: The Evolving Role of Spirit**

Spirit emerges in the late Biblical period to deal with a crisis that the Israelites were having in their image of God. James Kugel, an Orthodox Jewish scholar, describes this evolving image of God in *The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times*. The people of Israel had come to see God as the only God of all the universe. That created a problem. They still thought of God in some ways as like a person. A universal God lives somewhere beyond the clouds. A universal God is distant and remote—God can't be in all places at the same time.

People came to believe that God acted in the world by delegating responsibility to others. Angels and spirits carry out his orders. The late Biblical period saw the emergence of a cadre of independent angels. They move back and forth between heaven and earth.

People began to believe that they had something inside of them, a spiritual essence. The idea of a soul began to emerge. *Ruah* was an invisible spirit dispatched by God. It changed a person's behavior. God did not invisibly slip inside people; instead God sent an invisible intermediary. Late Biblical psalms, such as Psalm 119, gaze inward. The soul in the late Biblical period becomes the meeting place of heaven and earth instead of the Temple.

Jesus, like angels and spirits, moves back and forth between heaven and earth. John refers to Jesus as the Son of Man. The Son of Man is an eschatological title. The Son of Man first appears in Daniel 7, then again in 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, two books that were written in the intertestamental period, after the books in the Old Testament were written and before the New Testament. They describe the Son of Man as a supernatural being who comes from heaven to judge all people and rule the world as a human being.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.”

Believing in Jesus means believing that Jesus was sent by God so that we may share in the life of God. That is what John means by eternal life. It is not life after death but the quality of life here on earth. Eternal life means the life that God enjoys, a life filled with love, beauty and wonder.

John contrasts life of the spirit with life of the flesh. Life of the spirit is synonymous with God’s own life, eternal life. Life of the flesh is dominated by weakness and mortality. Life of the flesh is fleeting, like the grass of the field. Life of the flesh and life of the spirit describe the difference between the human and divine realms. Jesus shows us what the divine realm is like. We can’t reach the divine realm by ourselves. God sends the spirit to those who believe that Jesus reveals God’s eternal life.

John has a different version of Pentecost than Acts 2. In John’s Pentecost, Jesus gives the spirit to the disciples when he first appears to them after the resurrection. The disciples have locked themselves in a room, but Jesus miraculously appears. He said, “As my father sent me, so I send you.” Jesus breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

The spirit is a way of coping with an invisible God and an invisible Jesus. In Jewish eschatology and in the synoptic gospels, we feel the presence of God through the spirit. In the Gospel of John, it is the presence of Jesus that we feel through the spirit. After Jesus ascends to heaven to be with the Father, Jesus fills the disciples with the spirit. This enables them to enjoy eternal life, which is life with the Father, just as Jesus enjoys. So in John we also feel the presence of God through the spirit, but it comes first through the risen Christ. It is a little higher Christology.

### **Third Move: Eternal Life through the Spirit**

The spirit is not a tangible fact that you can prove. The spirit opens us up to a new realm of consciousness, in which we try to see the world from God’s perspective.

Our old friend, Richard Rohr, in his latest book, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*, says that the most important reason for rediscovering and reappreciating the Trinity today is that it changes the focus from the arguments about dogma to our inner experiences of transcendence.

Three people can be exposed to the same stimuli and come away with three different experiences. Our partisan political climate calls that fake news or alternative facts instead of recognizing that it is different experiences of the same facts.

Jesus makes the same point in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. When the rich man sees Lazarus reclining on Abraham's bosom, he asks Abraham to allow him to return to his brothers to warn them of the torment that awaits them. Abraham tells him, "They have Moses and the prophets. . . . If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

The spirit comes from outside us. To be born of the spirit is to open ourselves up to the life-giving power of God.

There are two different kinds of power. Political scientists define power as the ability to influence the behavior of others, with or without coercion. It is essentially to act in one's own self interest or in the self interest of one's group. The ability to get things done for yourself or your group. The President has power if he can get legislation through Congress or shape public opinion. A celebrity has power if he can get court-side tickets for a Thunder game.

The Gospel of John would call that an earthly view of power. If you are born of flesh, you are concerned with your own self interest.

God has a different view of power. The power of God is love, *ἀγάπη*. God so loved the world. That is the true nature of God. God's *ἀγάπη* is the opposite of self interest. It is caring for the interest of others. *ἀγάπη* does not mean like. It means unconditional regard for the well-being of others. God unconditionally cares about our well-being. We give up on people. Even the gospel writers give up on some people. I am not sure that God ever gives up on anyone. God continues to reach out to each and every person, hoping for what is best for them.

Jesus doesn't give up on Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night in today's text, but in John 7 Nicodemus speaks up after the chief priests and Pharisees scold the Temple police for not arresting Jesus. Nicodemus confronts the religious authorities and says, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" In John 19, after the crucifixion of Jesus, Nicodemus asks Pilate, the highest political ruler in the land, for permission to take Jesus' body down from the cross. Part of the punishment in crucifixion was to leave the body hanging on the cross for days, letting dogs tear the body apart. Pilate agreed to Nicodemus' request. Nicodemus took the body and anointed it with 100 pounds of myrrh and aloe and laid it in the tomb. Nicodemus showed more courage than the disciples.

Jesus' commandment to his disciples in the Gospel of John is that they should love one another, just as he loved them, just as God loves Jesus. To be born from above or born from the spirit is to be other centered instead of self centered. That is

the kind of power that is life-giving. It brings us into communion with the life of God and Jesus.

To be born of the spirit opens us up to new experiences. Life of the flesh is like putting on a pair of blinders that only allows you to see things from the perspective of your own self-interest and what you already know. Life of the spirit allows us to see things as they are, to appreciate creatures and creation on their own terms instead of on our terms. We don't feel a need to judge people and things and compare them to others. We simply behold them.

## **Conclusion**

We may think that the spirit is unnecessary now that we have a different image of God. As we grow in our spiritual development, we no longer think of God as a person, who lives in a distant place.

Spirit is still a useful image. We think of the spirit of Perrin Ellis and Pat Wharton still filling this place even though they are not physically present with us. We think of the spirit of our parents and grandparents still being with us even after they have died.

Spirit still has a place in our faith. It is that essence of God and Christ that touches our souls. The spirit fills Nicodemus with courage. Yes, it is invisible. That doesn't make it any less real.

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