

Sermon for June 11, 2006

Our Patron Saint Augustine wrote a book 800 pages long on the Trinity. When he had completed it he declared that he did not understand this doctrine fully. One day he continued to ponder the wonder of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit as he walked along the seashore. In the distance he saw a small boy playing with a seashell. The boy scooped a hole in the sand, filled his shell with water and poured it into the hole. Augustine asked the boy, "What are you doing, my son?" The youngster replied, "I am going to pour the sea into that hole." Then Augustine said to himself, "That is what I have been trying to do. Standing at the ocean of infinity, I have attempted to grasp it with my finite mind and pour God into such a hole.

Well I don't have 800 pages of material to share with you today as we think about the Trinity. But I do have about 2500 words. So let us stand at the ocean of infinity and ponder in our own way this most glorious doctrine of the Trinity.

God consists of three persons:

Father

Son

Spirit

I have sometimes likened the Trinity to a three-legged stool. It is one stool with each leg used to support the whole. In thinking about the Trinity we can say the same. In order to support the way God has revealed himself to us in the Bible we need to see him as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We cannot experience him in any other way.

But though we usually list him as

Father

Son

Spirit,

the actual experience of God is different.

We first meet Jesus by means Spirit,

and then the Father.

The Father is the source. The Father is unseen, unknown, except as he continually makes himself visible in Jesus

The Son is who we see and hear and know. He embodies the Father, day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment. He is continually revealing the Father, who apart from Jesus is invisible to us:

Repeatedly in the New Testament the Apostles attest to this truth:

Here are two passages that put this vividly

“God's Son has all the brightness of God's own glory and is like him in every way. By his own mighty word, he holds the universe together”:

How big is this universe? February 23, 1987. An astronomer named Ian Shelton working at an observatory in Chile observed with his naked eye the explosion of a distant supernovaa blast so powerful that it released as much energy in one second as our sun will release in ten billion years. The truly startling fact is that this supernova exploded 160,000 years ago. It took that long for the light generated by that faraway event, traveling almost 6 trillion miles a year, to reach us. Can you imagine the magnitude of a God who is bigger than all that?

And yet St. John says that the one who holds the universe together appeared before our eyes:

“The Word of Life appeared right before our eyes; we saw it happen! And now we're telling you in most sober prose that what we witnessed was, incredibly, this: The infinite Life of God himself took shape before us. “

The Father is logically first, but not chronologically.

For the Son exists as long as the Father exists, and has always existed with the Father. The Father acts through and in the Son.

He makes himself visible only in the Son. “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?” John 14:9

It is in the Son that the Father becomes a part of human life, and so is born and lives and dies in human life.

The Spirit, in turn, comes from the Son. And in so doing he becomes invisible again.

The Spirit proceeds silently, endlessly, invisibly from the Son. But the Son is not the source of the Spirit which proceeds from him. The Father is the source of both the Son and the Spirit. Back of the Son is the Father out of which the Son comes. The Spirit issues and proceeds from the Father, through the Son.

The Son therefore comes out from the invisible Father and perpetually and ever-newly embodies the Father in visible, audible, livable form, and returns again into invisible God in the Spirit.

The Spirit acts invisibly. He continually influences us with regard to the Son. He casts light upon the Son. That is his great function. He helps us to live in the Son which we know, and with reference to the Father whom we expect to one day see.

So with this in mind let us think for a few minutes about the Gospel reading we heard today.

Nicodemus came to visit Jesus by night... and much ink has been spilled over that. Why did he come by night? Was he afraid of “guilt by association”? Was he fearful of what his Pharisee colleagues might think? Or did he want a private audience with Jesus undisturbed? Was he coming

as a “watchdog” of the Sanhedrin? Or was he genuinely interested in getting to know Jesus better? All of these are fascinating questions, but what is amazing here is that he came to Jesus at all. His Pharisee friends would have scoffed at this thought. After all, Jesus was not one of them... and besides that they were supremely suspicious of him. They had labeled him a trouble-maker who was upsetting the people... and they were looking for an opportunity to silence him. They saw Jesus as a threat.

But Nicodemus came to him and Nicodemus said to him: “Rabbi, you must be a teacher who has come from God because no one could do the signs and wonders you do apart from the presence of God.” And Jesus responded to Nicodemus by saying to him: “You can’t see the Kingdom of God without being born again. You must be born from above.” This means that you can’t become a Christian by making a few minor adjustments to your life. It must be a complete turn around, a radical re-birth, a re-birth from above, which, of course means a new life from God. Nicodemus didn’t understand. He didn’t get it. So, Jesus explained with what many would call the greatest verse in all of the Bible, John 3:16: “For 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.”

And so when Jesus says to Nicodemus we must be born again to enter into the kingdom of God, he means by that as we begin to see Jesus for who he is, and choose to begin to trust in him there will result a spiritual birth. And just as we breathe in oxygen when we take our first breath in this world; when we are spiritually born again we breathe in the life giving oxygen of the Spirit.

As we are filled with the Spirit to see Jesus for who he is, we then our able to believe in the Father, trust in him and know that we are his sons and daughter.

Some years ago, the great boxer, Mohammed Ali, was asked by a ghetto youth how he could quit school and start a boxing career since he had bad grades. Ali smiled at the young man and said in his poetic fashion:

“Stay in college and get the knowledge,

-And stay there! Til you’re through

-Cause if God can make penicillin out of moldy bread,

-He can make something out of you.”

This is the good news of John 3. Because God so loved the world, He SENT His only son to make something out of us... when we accept Him into our lives and commit our hearts to Him,... then He gives us new life in this world... and new life in the world to come. That’s what it means to be “born again” or “born from above,”... but let me be more specific and describe this new birth with three thoughts. You will think of other dimensions of this re-birth through Christ, but for now... let’s try these three on for size.

## I. FIRST OF ALL...TO BE BORN FROM ABOVE MEANS TO COME ALIVE TO THE BIBLE.

In his book “Biblical Proclamation for Africa Today” John Wesley (2wo/mu/non/dii/ta Kurewa Abingdon 1995, 15-16) tells a wonderful story about a young woman who had heard people talking about an interesting new book that had just been published. Everybody raved about how great it was. She went to the bookstore, found a copy, bought it, took it home and tried to read it... but, somehow she just couldn’t get into it... She would read a little and then put the book aside. It did not capture her attention.

A few months later, the young woman was traveling in a foreign country. She met a handsome young man and she fell in love with him. As they spent time together, she discovered that he was a writer... and would you believe it?... He was the author of that book everyone was talking about back home, the one she had bought and tried to read, but couldn’t get into it... and had put aside. When she returned home, she found the book and started reading it again,... and this time she couldn’t put it down! She read it from cover to cover... and then read it again and again. It was the most exhilarating book she had ever read in her life. What was the difference? Simply this: She now had met the author. She knew him personally. He was her friend; indeed, she was in love with him.

This story is a wonderful parable for what it means to “come alive” to the Bible. If we don’t know Christ personally, the Bible is hard to read, difficult to get into, easy to put aside. But, when we know Christ personally and intimately, when we feel His love and return His love,... then the Bible comes alive for us; it becomes a “love letter” from God; it becomes the most exciting book we have ever read in our life.

There is a fascinating thing to notice here about Nicodemus. He knew his scriptures well. But for him, being religious meant knowing what to do and especially what not to do. The emphasis of his Bible study was on what people do. But Jesus changed all of that. He said that in order to see the Kingdom of God, the emphasis must shift to what God does. The new Testament makes it clear that this “new birth” is not our doing. We are “born from above”; it is God’s gift. We can’t earn it. We can only accept it in faith: So, “To Be Born From Above” means to come alive to the Bible by falling in love with “the author and finisher of our faith.”

## II. SECOND, TO BE BORN FROM ABOVE MEANS TO COME ALIVE TO LOVE.

A little girl went to the doctor for a check-up. When the doctor came into the examining room, she held up both hands to get his attention and then she said: “Dr., I know what you are going to do. You are going to do 5 things. You are going to check my eyes, my ears, my nose, my throat and my heart.” The Dr. smiled and said: “Well, Sarah, that is exactly right. Is there any particular order I should go in?” Sarah said: “You can go in any order you want to... but if I were you, I’d start with the heart!!!” That’s what Jesus did, wasn’t it? He started with the heart. He started with Love... and that is precisely what he wants us to do!

Nicodemus and his Pharisee friends had a hard time with that because they had been taught all of their lives to start with all those laws and rules and regulations and restrictions. For example, if a man fell into a hole on the Sabbath Day and was screaming for help,... the Pharisee would say: What does the law say about this? Well, the law says “You can’t work on the Sabbath Day”,... so their response would be “Sorry, can’t help you today. Maybe somebody will come along tomorrow. Sorry, can’t break the Scribal law.” On the other hand, Jesus would start with the heart and He

would say to the man in the hole, "Give me your hand, I'll pull you out."

That night in Jerusalem long ago, Jesus was saying to Nicodemus (and to us): "You don't have to stay the way you are. You don't have to be a prisoner to legalism. There are other worlds to sing in. You can be re-born from above. You can come alive to the Bible and you can come alive to Love. Give me your hand Nicodemus; I'll pull you out."

### III. THIRD AND FINALLY, TO BE BORN FROM ABOVE MEANS TO COME ALIVE TO ETERNAL LIFE.

For the Christian, death is not death at all. It is not the end of life. It is simply moving through a door called "death" into a new dimension of life with God.

Perhaps you have heard of Henry Van Dyke's Parable of Immortality. It is a powerful parable on how we see death and how death should really be viewed. Listen to this:

"I am standing on the seashore.

-A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean.

-She is an object of beauty and strength and I stand and watch until at last she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come down to mingle with each other.

-Then someone at my side says, 'There she goes!' Gone where? Gone from my sight... that is all.

-She is just as large in mast and hull and span, as she was when she left my side and just as able to bear her load of living freight to the place of their destination.

-Her diminished size is in me, not in her.

-And just at the moment when someone at my side says,

-‘There she goes’ there are other eyes watching her coming... and other voices ready to take up the glad shout,

-‘Here she comes! Here she comes!!’ on the other shore.

This is the good news of our Christian faith. We can be born again in this life... and we can be born yet again when death comes. When we commit our lives to Christ, God will always be there for us, even on the other side of the grave. We can count on that because we know that... “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

Being “born from above” means many things, but for sure it means accepting Christ into our lives as our personal savior and through Him coming alive to the Bible, coming alive to Christ-like love, and coming alive to eternal life.