

Trinity Sunday
Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 29, John 3:1-17
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A young boy, riding his bike, stops in front of a church just as the priest is coming out. The priest says, "Young man, come inside, I want to show you something." The little boy says, "But somebody will steal my bike." The priest replies, "Don't worry, the Holy Spirit will watch over it."

So the little boy goes inside and the priest says, "Let me show you how to make the sign of the cross. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.* Now you try it." The boy says, "*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, Amen.*"

The priest is confused and asks him, "What happened to the Holy Spirit?" The boy replies, "Oh, he's outside, watching my bike."

Someone asked in Bible Study this past Thursday, "How does the Trinity relate to our everyday lives?"

This boy has a limited but pretty good practical understanding of the Trinity, I'd say. He knew that the Holy Spirit is separate from the Father and the Son yet still powerful and capable. If God, the Son, has now ascended to the heavenly places to be with God, the Father, and God, the Holy Spirit, has been sent down or descended to earth, then it is God, the Holy Spirit, that we will have the most direct contact with in our daily lives.

In fact, we believe that at our baptism, God, the Holy Spirit, takes up residence within us. That is pretty close contact for sure. The Holy Spirit, scripture tells us, helps us pray, guides us in good decision making, leads us into new truths, energizes us to do good and godly works, shows us when we have gone astray, comforts and strengthens us with the Father's and the Son's compassion and love, and helps us understand the meaning of our sacred texts.

Interestingly, in today's gospel, Nicodemus has no understanding of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is a little rough on him, but Nicodemus's ignorance is pretty understandable. He is a Jewish teacher, a Pharisee, and a member of the leadership council in Jerusalem, akin to our Congress. He has spent his entire life studying the first five books of the Bible, which are called the Law, the Torah or the Pentateuch, and he has tried to keep to all these rules and lots more. He was a devout legalist believing that by acting right and keeping himself pure, God would be pleased with him.

Elsewhere, Jesus harshly refers to such Pharisees and legalists as whitewashed tombs that are clean on the outside but rotten on the inside (Matthew 23). I read about an interesting comparison the other day. The author said, "Imagine a little old lady is walking down the street at night with a large pocketbook hanging loosely on her shoulder. You think, it sure would be easy to knock her down and swipe that bag from her. But then you think, I wouldn't do that because that is not the kind of person I am. If I did that, I would be a despicable person, no one would respect me, and I wouldn't respect myself. Of course I wouldn't do that." Does that sound reasonable?

The author goes on to say that if that is our thought process then we are responding from a concept of honor and a shame-based culture. This response is ultimately "self-regarding." I do the right thing so I will maintain a good standing in the larger community or the church and before God. This is the way Nicodemus has been brought up as well as those of us who were told repeatedly that "Teschners don't behave that way!"

An alternative thought process that could dissuade one from stealing the handbag is to imagine what it would feel like to be mugged and robbed. Furthermore, what might it mean to the woman and any people who depend on her to have lost the money and/or credit cards? We would never harm and take the woman's money because we want the best for her and her dependents.

This is, the author points out, an "other-regarding ethic" as compared to the earlier "self-regarding ethic." Here one thinks not of the consequences to oneself but to the other person or persons.

Which ethic did Jesus teach?

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Jewish priest and Levite pass by the man who was robbed because they are worried they might endanger themselves or become impure if they touch the severely wounded or dead man. They are acting out of a "self-regarding ethic." On the other hand, a Samaritan man, not even friendly toward Jews, stops and goes out of his way to help the man. Obviously, he is putting aside any prejudice or bias or holier-than-thou attitude and coming to the aid of another human being in trouble illustrating the "other-regarding ethic."

Do we live by rules or by compassion? Are our behaviors the result of what we want others to see - external values? Or do we follow our hearts that feel another's pain as if it were our own?

Nicodemus is very cerebral or outer-oriented. He cannot imagine that the Holy Spirit or third member of the Trinity could transform a person from within.

Most of us, like Nicodemus, are more comfortable with exterior changes than the interior ones that God wants for us. The syndicated columnist, Mike Royko, once wrote tongue-in-cheek that he planned to make some real changes in his life. He planned to start wearing clean shorts and socks that matched.

On the other hand, author Robert Raines tells about a woman named Alice who wrote this about herself after her baptism. She said:

Alice doesn't live here anymore.

She left and someone else has moved in.

The new woman is something different than Alice!

Alice kept the shades drawn, the door locked, and was always crabby to her neighbors.

She must have been a lonely and unhappy person!

But the new tenant is warm and alive,

windows and doors are always open,

garden in bloom, and the teakettle on the stove.

She's really human with joys and hurts, too,

but she seems ready to meet them and deal with them.

I am sure glad to know her.

Poor Alice -- wonder where she is gone.

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don't really care --

I'm just glad!

Nicodemus, we are told, came to see Jesus by night most likely because he didn't want his fellow Pharisees and council members to know he was consorting with the enemy. He's worried about what others will think.

We know that even though he doesn't seem to get what Jesus is talking about, he does gradually change from within. In Chapter 7 of the same gospel, he stands amid the council and tries to get a fair hearing for Jesus even though he is criticized and shouted down. And, after Jesus dies, according to John, it is Nicodemus who buys the valuable aloes and spices to anoint Jesus' body. Nicodemus like Alice is not the same person he first was in today's reading.

Becoming a new person is not easy. We need help. But everything we need is there at the ready if we will but ask the Father, Son or Holy Spirit. Three is always better than one. Aren't we glad! Amen.

