

The Holy Trinity John 3:1-17

Today is part two of a two-part sermon. As I was preparing last week's sermon, a quote from Luther came to mind. The more I meditated upon the quote and the Gospel reading, the more I realized it's a great quote for today's Gospel as well. Here is Luther again, commenting on the success of the reformation:

"I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything." (AE 51.77)

Just like I said last week: the Word, the Word, the Word. The Word does the work. The Word convicts you of sin. The Word assures you of the promises of Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and the salvation of your souls. The Word comforts you when you're depressed or anxious. The Word does the work.

Last week you heard about how the Word is all about Jesus. When you read the Scriptures, your first question should be, "what does this tell me about Jesus?" Then and only then can you find out how the text applies to you. That was quite fitting for Pentecost, the celebration of God giving His Holy Spirit to us, who points to Jesus. The second aspect of the Word that's critically important is quite appropriate for today, Holy Trinity Sunday. We recite the Athanasian Creed in celebration of the victory of Orthodoxy, or right worship. Error had crept into the church, as it always does, and the Athanasian Creed plainly sets forth for us who our God is: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The reason this matters is because words matter. Words mean particular things.

Words are especially important because that is how Jesus chooses to reveal Himself to us. We can't go to Him like Nicodemus and sit with Him face to face as He teaches us about Himself. We must rely on the Scriptures to learn about Jesus. And by learning about Jesus, we learn about God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us in Colossians, "Jesus is the image of the invisible God." (v. 1:15) You cannot know God apart from Jesus. And you know Jesus by knowing His Word. And His Word has rules.

This means that besides your father and your pastor in your youth, the most important teacher in your life was your 7th grade grammar teacher! And they were probably the most underappreciated teachers you have except by a few of you who love grammar. Now it is true that God's Word was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The full richness of God's Word is found in these languages, but your English Bible is fully the Word of God. Reading your Bible in English is like looking at pictures of Sainte-Chapelle. Online technology is really amazing. You can see pictures and panoramas of this incredible chapel which is located in Paris, France. You can even move your phone or tablet around and see the image of what you would be seeing in person if you stood in the middle of the real place. Even at different times of the day. But it just isn't the same as being in the real Sainte-Chapelle. I've been there and can attest to this personally. This is why we want our pastors to study and learn the original languages.

There's a real richness in reading the Word of God in Hebrew and Greek that you just can't get in English. But you still get all you need in English. And whether you read in Hebrew or Greek or English, grammar matters. And whether you read today's Gospel in Greek or English, you still don't see Jesus' facial expressions or hear His tone of voice. Wouldn't you love to see that and hear that when Jesus asks Nicodemus, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (v. 10) And since we can't see His face and hear His tone, the grammar matters all the more.

Jesus says you must be born again or born from above. Both meanings make sense with the word that Jesus uses. Nicodemus obviously heard it as being born again with his incredulous response about crawling back into his mother's womb. But knowing John 1:13 that informs us that we are born from above, "not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." That is, you cannot be born into it. Being a natural offspring of Abraham does not give you the right to be a child of God. You cannot do good works, including a decision, to be a child of God. Even our best works empowered by God's Holy Spirit are tainted with our original sin. You cannot think or will yourself into the kingdom of God. Jesus crucified is a stumbling block to the Jew and folly to the Gentile. It must happen by the will of God. As Jesus says, "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." (v. 8)

Thanks be to God, we know where the Spirit works... in water baptism. Jesus equates being born again in verse 3 with water baptism in verse 5. That's what being born of water and the Spirit means. We see this on Pentecost day when the people are cut to the quick by Peter's sermon and they ask what they must do to be saved: "repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38) Peter says the same thing that Jesus says here in John 3. Peter also says the gift of water baptism is for your children as well which includes infants. If baptism were our own work, it wouldn't make sense to baptize infants. But Jesus says we cannot be saved by our own work. Baptism is God the Holy Spirit's work, and we all need it, including infants. Sadly, people do reject the gift of Baptism, but that doesn't nullify the gift. Jesus tells us what's behind the power of baptism.

He tells Nicodemus that the Son of Man must be lifted up on the cross. Jesus didn't come to condemn the world but to save the world. He reconciles the world to Himself with His work on the cross.

The entire world, including everyone ever born or who will be born, is reconciled to God by Jesus' work. We call this objective justification. Jesus won your salvation on the cross. But the fruit of the cross must be delivered to you in Word and Sacrament, especially Baptism. We call this subjective justification. God acts on you in your baptism to make you His child. This is how Paul describes it: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." You notice here that the verbs are passive. God is the actor and you are the one being acted upon. You walk in the newness of life that God the Holy Spirit gives you. Peter also speaks the same way: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God." Who's bringing whom? Peter continues: "that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 3:18-21) Again God is the actor, and you are the one being acted upon. That's why Peter can say Baptism now saves you! God acts upon you in your baptism and saves you. Even though you don't see it with your eyes. Your body betrays you as it decays from the effects of sin until it finally goes into the grave. You struggle against God's will for your lives, also known as the Ten Commandments, until you go to your grave. If you look to your heritage, or your works, or your will, you have no assurance of your salvation which is what Peter calls a clean conscience. But if God is the one acting in Baptism, which He clearly says over and over again, you can have assurance of your salvation. That is the great comfort of Baptism.

Some Christians say that God forgives your sins up to your Baptism and then it's up to you to cooperate. This is what Rome teaches.

There's no comfort in this. Not if you take a long and hard look at your life compared to the ten commandments. Your feeble attempts to keep God's commandments don't match the perfect righteousness that He requires. The sermon on the mount isn't just some moral teaching that informs you how to act, but it shows you how far you are from God's perfect standard. You must have Jesus' righteousness given to you in your baptism which He freely gives you.

Other Christians say that you must make a decision to be baptized. Yeah, God does most of the work, but I must do this one little part. Many Protestants teach this. But how does a person dead in their sin and trespasses make a decision? The only decision they can make is to sin more and more. This insistence on making a decision robs glory from Christ and robs Baptism of all its comfort.

Other Christians say that God chooses some for salvation and chooses others for damnation. Many other Protestants teach this. How do you know you're one of those elected for salvation instead of damnation? You look to your works! Besides making God the author of evil, this brings no comfort to those who look at their works honestly. There is no comfort here.

But God is not a God of discomfort, but of comfort. That's why He teaches all over the Scriptures that He is the actor working upon you to save you in your baptism. As John says in his first epistle, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (v. 4:10) He applies that propitiation for your sins to you in your baptism. If Baptism were all there was, that would be enough. But God showers grace upon grace down upon us. He gives us His Holy Spirit so that we understand His Word where He reveals Himself to us. He gives us His Holy Absolution through the pastor as through God Himself, so we have the assurance of a clean conscience before God. He gives us His Holy Supper where He comes to us in the flesh under bread and wine so that He might join Himself to us and make us holy.

What kind of people would we be if we believed this?

Would we be a people of fear and sorrow? No. We are a people of joy and hope.

Would we be a people that despise the gifts of God in the Sacraments? No. We are a people who run to these amazing gifts of grace.

Would we be a people that despise preaching and His Word? No. We are a people that has the Word of God in our ears and hearts and on our tongues.

What kind of people would we be if we believed that Jesus visits us personally here today in His Word and Holy Supper?

Cling to Jesus by clinging to the Word. The Word combined with water. The Word proclaimed by the pastor in Holy Absolution and the preaching. The Word combined with bread and wine. The Word, the Word, the Word. The Word does the work. The Holy Spirit delivers Jesus to you in the Word and “whoever believes in Him is not condemned.” (v. 18)

In Jesus’ name. Amen.