

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

---

Preparing for Sunday, May 27, 2018 // Trinity Sunday, Year B

## The Gospel: John 3:1-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just 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, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

## Background and general observations

*Is it irony, grace, or both, that the only Sunday in the church year set aside to celebrate a church doctrine, Trinity Sunday, follows the major feast of Pentecost, when we celebrate the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit and the transformation of timid disciples into emboldened leaders? Some might say that the day on which we celebrate disciples speaking in many different tongues and appearing to bystanders to be drunk at mid-day stands in sharp contrast to a day on which we celebrate the carefully crafted and sober doctrine of the Trinity. Of course, the Trinity is not so much the **object** of faith, as it is the **explication** of faith. The experience of God is ineffable and multifaceted. We hardly know what to say, but we feel compelled to say something. The doctrine of the Trinity is the central dogma of Christianity that, among other things, gave words and concepts for people to use in talking about something that strained the limits of language.*

*In a way, it makes sense then that dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus in the third chapter of John's Gospel is the lesson appointed for Trinity Sunday. Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, is drawn to Jesus, but many have conjectured that he comes to Jesus "by night" because he is afraid of others knowing that he is drawn to this rabbi. Nicodemus seems to indicate that religious officials have found some merit in Jesus' teaching. "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God," Nicodemus says, "for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."*

*Yet, in the two verses that immediately precede this story, we read that many believed in Jesus "because they saw the signs that he was doing." (John 2:24) But Jesus "would not entrust himself to them." So, when Nicodemus*

*asserts confidently that they “know” Jesus has come from God because of the signs, perhaps we are seeing up front that Nicodemus’ approach and understanding are suspect.*

*Jesus makes it clear that his focus is not on signs or teachings but on a complete transformation that can be described as a rebirth “from above.” “No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above,” he says. The magnitude of this idea is difficult to understand (kind of like the Trinity), and Nicodemus presses Jesus to say more, by asking how this could be. But whereas Jesus had spoken about being born “from above,” Nicodemus asks how one can be born again in the earthly sense, by “entering a second time into the mother’s womb.”*

*This precipitates Jesus’ discussion about being born “of the flesh” and being born “of the Spirit.” Of course, where you are born is where you are “from” and where you “belong.” And Jesus speaks of his own origins when he says that the Son of Man is the one who “descended from heaven.”*

*Throughout this dialogue, we have an interweaving of the divine persons of the Trinity: God, who gave God’s only Son; Jesus, the Son of Man who descended from heaven; and the Spirit, who is the giver of life. And by saying that we must be “born from above,” Jesus is inviting us into this divine, eternal life.*

## **Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives**

1. John Calvin suggested that Nicodemus was a secret disciple of Jesus. This is the reason he comes at night. Calvin used this story to coin a word, “Nicodemites.” Nicodemites were the people in France who were evangelicals at heart but Roman Catholics in practice. They were people who could not bring themselves to show forth in their lives what they believed in their hearts.

In what ways might you be a Nicodemus-like character?

In the words of Parker J. Palmer, how is your “soul,” your truest self, sometimes at odds with your “role” in life? Is your nighttime or more private truth sometimes at odds with your daytime public practice?

2. “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.”

This is the John 3:16 that you might see held up on poster board near the end zone at a football game. It’s been painted on bridges and overpasses and printed on shopping bags; it’s one of the most popular verses in the Bible and what Martin Luther called “the Gospel in miniature.”

Some have heard this verse quoted by people, likely earnest evangelicals, who interpret it to mean that one must believe what they believe in order to have eternal life. Sometimes, that doesn’t sound like good news at all. How do you hear this verse? What does it mean to you? Is there another verse that rings true to you as “the Gospel in miniature”?

3. The Trinity—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—is a way of naming God. We say that God exists as three persons—three elements—but as one single, divine nature and that no one of the three is more powerful or more active or more correct than the other. That is, each is understood to have the identical essence, the identical nature of God.

In thinking about your private life of prayer, do you imagine yourself praying to God the Father? God the Son? Or to God the Holy Spirit? We are always, *in essence*, praying to one God but what might such a personal distinction reveal to you about your relationship with the Divine?

4. “Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’”

What would you say might be signs that a person has been “born from above”? How does that person live or conduct herself in such a way that you know she has been “born from above”? How is that person different from other people?

5. “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen...”

For many, an experience of God may be an unspeakable experience. And yet most feel compelled to say *something*—to testify, to make meaning, to record and document. We all *use* language even when talking about things that are beyond the limits *of* language simply because it is our human nature to want to understand our experiences. But there are, simply put, some things for which there are no words.

What are some ways you have found to manage profound experiences, such as an experience of the Divine? How have you reconciled a desire to speak of God with an acceptance that perhaps there is no vocabulary sufficient to do so? What can you do instead of speak? How else can we testify?