

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Trinity Sunday, May 30, 2010

✝ ✝ ✝

Hymns: 242, 246:4, 245, 237, 244.

Lessons: Ezekiel 36:25-27, Romans 8:14-17, John 7: 32-52.

Text: John 3: 1-18.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16.

We sometimes forget the context of what is perhaps the most familiar passage from the entire Bible, John 3:16. A man named Nicodemus, a teacher of the Jews, came to Jesus and confessed that Jesus was a teacher come from God. Jesus filled his ears and heart with more knowledge than that. Jesus spoke to him of the kingdom of God. Jesus spoke to him of being born again. Jesus spoke to him of being born of water and the Spirit of God. Jesus spoke to him about the brass snake Moses made in the desert when the people sinned and God sent poisonous snakes among them, and about looking up in faith to be saved. And Jesus spoke to him of the Gospel and all that God had done for mankind.

Today we look at

NICODEMUS

- 1. A man who asked questions about God.**
- 2. A man who learned about the kingdom of God**
- 3. A man who learned about the only-begotten Son of God who came to save mankind.**

St. John is the only writer who names Nicodemus, and only speaks of him in 5 passages, three of which are found in our sermon text. Nicodemus was a Pharisee.

Most of the times when Jesus encountered Pharisees, they were trying to discredit him, or trip him in his words, or make people reject him. Nicodemus was different. He came to Jesus at night, privately, perhaps because he feared the other Pharisees, who saw Jesus as a threat to their power. But he came sincerely seeking the truth. He recognized that Jesus was ***"a teacher who has come from God."*** He told Jesus ***"For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."***

Jesus, true God, knows what Nicodemus is thinking, and seems to change the subject. But he tells Nicodemus what he needs to hear. ***"In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."*** Jesus explained that no one is able to see the kingdom of God unless he is born again, or "born from above".

Nicodemus didn't understand. All he could think about was an earthly, human birth, the birth of a child. ***"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"***

“Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. Jesus is not talking about the birth of a human baby. He is talking about entering the kingdom of God, about being born again.

Do you remember when you came to faith? Probably not. Many people make a big deal and place a great deal of importance on recognizing when they came to faith, when they were converted, especially with the idea of when YOU made your decision for Christ. But you are totally passive in your conversion. You cannot by your own choosing or thinking believe in Jesus Christ nor come to him. The King James Version of the Bible makes that especially clear, and is a better translation than many translations here: ***“turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God.”*** Jeremiah 31:18.

This new birth comes from water and the spirit together, not from water and of the Spirit as two separate experiences. Water and the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God work together in the new birth. Jesus was speaking of baptism.

We need this heavenly birth to enter God’s kingdom, or even to see the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is God’s rule of grace in our hearts. Through baptism the Holy Spirit connects us with God’s ruling love. He works a new birth, a birth that makes a person a child of God and a member of God’s kingdom. It is not an earthly kingdom, for Jesus himself told us ***“the kingdom of God is within you.”*** Luke 17:21. St. Paul tells us that God ***“saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,”*** Titus 3:5.

Every human is born sinful. In fact, we must admit with the Word of God ***“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”*** Psalms 51:5. Some people teach that there is no such thing as original sin. Anyone who has observed children behaving selfishly, even before they can speak would recognize that children are not sinless. I even had one mother tell me that a two-day old nursing infant actually bit her in anger, possibly because he wasn’t being fed fast enough.

Job wrote ***“Who can bring what is pure from the impure? No one!”*** Job 14:4. St. Paul wrote ***“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.”*** Romans 7:18.

But the Holy Spirit works this new birth through the water of baptism and the Word of God.

Nicodemus didn’t understand what Jesus was saying. Man without the working of the Holy Spirit cannot understand the things of God. We can understand the workings of the Holy Spirit as little as we can predict the wind blowing on us. We know when it blows, and it affects us. But we don’t see it. We can’t be certain when or from what angle it will come. So everyone born of the Spirit cannot fully understand how God in his wisdom sends the Spirit. They just believe that he does.

When Jesus tells us ***“You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again,’*** the original Greek makes it clear that Jesus was using “you” as a plural word, not just talking about Nicodemus, but about all mankind. All mankind must be born again.

Nicodemus didn’t understand, and yet he was one of Israel’s spiritual leaders, one of their spiritual teachers.

So Jesus speaks of his authority – he was the very Son of God. ***“No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man.”*** Jesus, WE know, was the true Son of God, come down from heaven.

Then Jesus uses a picture from the Old Testament to lead up to his crucifixion. When the people grumbled against God and against Moses, God's servant, ***"Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. The LORD said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived."*** Numbers 21:6-9.

Jesus draws a parallel between this event in Israel's past history and what was about to happen to him. The snake was lifted up on a pole; Jesus was to be lifted up on a cross. Everyone who looked in faith at the snake was healed from the bite of deadly snakes. Everyone who would look in faith at Jesus would be saved from the bite of eternal death and have eternal life. This is the life that begins with the new birth by the Spirit.

The promise belongs to everyone who believes. No one who believes is excluded. And this becomes a very personal thing by the Holy Spirit working in each believer. The promise belongs to each one who believes. God knows our names, and each person who believes has eternal life.

Then Jesus tells us why and how we have eternal life. ***"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."***

God loved the world he had created, and he loved man, the crown of that creation, even though man had sinned and ruined it all. Our sins did not stop God from loving us. The sins of Adam and Eve and Cain and Sarah and Abraham and David and Judas and Paul and Luther and Hitler and each of us – God knew them all – and they did not turn off God's love. HE loved the world and excluded no one. God offers his love to everyone. But only those who believe in the only-begotten Son of God receive the eternal life that God provided for mankind. God's love was unconditional. He wants everyone to have eternal life. He wants to save the world through Jesus Christ.

Those who believe in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, shall not perish. Whoever believes in the Son of God is not condemned. Sin loses all power to damn that person. Still, some are condemned because they do not believe ***"in the name of God's one and only Son."*** Unbelief damns. That is the verdict. God will simply confirm it on judgment day.

The Love of God could be the subject of a whole sermon and more. Some families – especially as they play with their children and in that way teach them – speak of how much they love one another. They would say "I love you THIS much." And then show or give some example of "how much" and then the other person comes back with a "THIS much" that is even bigger or greater. So, how much is the "THIS much" that God loved mankind? How much does God love YOU? "God SO loved the world"! He loved the world SO much that he sacrificed, gave up, killed his one and only Son in a most horrible way. And he did it despite the sins we are all guilty of. And he did it so that everyone who believes God did this will, SHALL have eternal life, just by believing in Jesus as Savior.

What a grand thing that is – to know that God loves me SO much! May we never forget that! Amen.