

Born of Water, Born of Spirit

John 3:1-17

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Let us Pray: Relational God, on this Trinity Sunday, remind us of your renewal and your fundamental nature of being a beloved community. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever heard the joke about the Trinity, between Jesus and Peter?

Jesus said, "Who do people say that I am?"

And his disciples answered and said, "Some say you are John the Baptist returned from the dead; others say Elijah, or even other say you are one of the prophets."

And Jesus answered and said, "But who do you say that I am?"

Peter eyes lit up and he quickly answered, "Thou art the Logos, existing in the Father as Divine rationality and then, by an act of Divine will, being generated, in consideration of the various functions by which God is related to the creation, but only on the fact that Scripture speaks of a Father, and a Son, and a Holy Spirit, each member of the Trinity being coequal with every other member, and each acting inseparably with and interpenetrating every other member, with only an economic subordination within God, but causing no division which would make the substance no longer simple."

And Jesus eyes lit up and he quickly said, "Peter, what in the world are you talking about?"

Maybe you are as mystified by the trinity as Jesus himself in this joke appears to be!

On Trinity Sunday, we are invited to encounter God as Three in One. The use of the Triune formula connects the church today with the historic church, born in the struggle of Christians throughout generations to express their beliefs about God and the nature of God's Very Being. The language ties together the churches of this generation in our ecumenical life, especially in the Sacrament of Baptism. And here at First Congregational we incorporate many images which point to the substance and characteristics of the Holy Mystery which is our God. "Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit"; "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier"; "Maker, Lover, Keeper"; "Father, Son and Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of All." So with the church of all ages, we express our faith in the Divine, recognizing its Mystery with the awareness that words are not sufficient to grasp the One who holds us all.

Trinity Sunday, in a sense, synthesizes all we have celebrated over the past months which have centered on God's mighty acts: Christmas-Epiphany celebrating God's taking flesh and dwelling among us in Jesus Christ; Easter celebrating Christ's death and resurrection for us; Pentecost celebrating God the Holy Spirit becoming our Sanctifier, Guide, and Teacher. Trinity Sunday is a fitting transition in our liturgical calendar to that part of the year when Sunday by Sunday the work of God among us is unfolded in a more general way.

Our scripture from John is a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. This exchange was deeply embedded within the contemporary religious conversations and principles of the time. The Judaism that both Nicodemus and Jesus were born into was greatly determined by the family you were born into, namely, that you were born into the right family. Born into a family whose lineage was traced to Abraham and whose family practices were the product of temple teachings with the right customs and right fellow members. But now Jesus is saying something radically new, God is starting a new family in which one's ordinary birth wasn't what was really needed anymore. Jesus was saying that now you needed to be born anew, born all over again, born from "above". Interestingly the Greek word here is ANOTHEN which can mean "from above" or "for a second time". In either translation of the word- Jesus challenges Nicodemus's religious

birth right in light of the Good News and the new, transformative identity bestowed upon us from God above.

Importantly, the gospel of John is a massive attempt to reach the Jewish people who remained in the synagogue. And also importantly, Nicodemus is one who is trying to make up his mind about Jesus.

This new birth might best be described as a double baptism, Born of Water and Born of Spirit. Jesus proclaims a coupling of the acts of being baptized like Jesus in the Jordan, and the parallel burgeoning forth of the Spirit bestowed by God. It was a common discussion among early Christians to doubt the necessity of the double baptism: many just didn't believe that Baptism was an important, visible sign engrafting them into the life of the early church. Many didn't comprehend the importance of recognizing the Spirit dwelling within us all, like springs gushing forth life-giving water, renewing and giving hope to the world around us. And yet, Jesus says to Nicodemus, recognizing the important of what we now call the sacrament of Baptism, is needed so that we have eyes to see God's kingdom around us and how and where God's kingdom overlaps our own.

I wonder, what would it have been like to be Nicodemus, a respected senior teacher in his faith community, to hear these mysterious words from The One who claimed to be The Son of Man?

Abrasive? Repelling? Humbling? Confusing?

Well in speaking about being born anew, one theologian likens this passage to his birth certificate which he had lost at one time. He muses:

*The one thing that a birth certificate isn't needed for is to prove that my birth took place. Here I am, a human being; obviously I must have been born. The fact that at the moment I can't officially prove when and where is a minor detail.*

*(Likewise) When Christians discuss the ‘new birth’, the ‘second birth’ or the ‘birth from above’, they often forget this. Some people experience their entry into Christian **faith** as a huge, tumultuous event, with a dramatic build-up, a painful moment of decision and then tidal waves of relief, joy, exhilaration, forgiveness and love. They are then easily tempted —to think that this moment itself is the center of what it means to be a Christian, as though what God wanted was simply to give people a single wonderful spiritual experience, to be remembered ever afterwards with a warm glow.*

*But that’s a bit like someone framing their birth certificate, hanging it on the wall, and insisting on showing it to everyone who comes into the house. What matters for most purposes is not that once upon a time you were born — though of course sometimes it matters that you can prove when and where you were born. What matters is that you are alive now, and that your present life, day by day and moment by moment, is showing evidence of health and strength and purpose. – N.T. Wright*

Here is Jesus making an invitation once again, flinging the doors open: anyone, from any family, from any faith or lack of faith, from any community, with any health condition or mental competence, any history of sin or shameful occupation- could come to an be born a second time, born anew, given life in what others saw as death, reclaimed from what others saw as trash, re-created as a beloved person in relationship to a living and loving God who had reached out to them.

Jesus invites us to be alive today, in this moment.

In what ways have you been born anew in your life? In what ways might our triune God be seeking your renewal, or working through you for the renewal of others?

God’s love is essentially rooted in the community of the trinity. Gods love is rooted in choosing community, and it is in community where life is born anew. In the trinity we see that God’s love is a seeking love, a love that at its core reaches out to us and is not brought about by our worthiness, our circumstances, our sufficient understanding. God’s love is so rich and full and deep that God anguishes over us, God joyfully delights within

us, in the life of Christ God's compassionate engaged work seeking to engraft us into the body of the Christian faith.

“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.”

I once took a youth service trip to the Olympic Peninsula of Washington. On our day off we went to take a hike up the Hoh River Valley in the Olympic National Park which is a temperate rain forest. We sauntered along the blue clear waters of the river under towering stands of cedar and redwood. And I remember stopping and staring upwards at their mighty umbrellas of limbs fanning out in all directions and then tracing each limb back down the trunks of the trees which were as wide as cars, then to the base of the trunks, which were lined up in rows along giant linear mounds of earth. Their roots, larger around than my waist, spread down in all directions before hitting the soil. These giant trees were birthed by nurse logs, the mighty trunks of fallen trees that crumbled and decayed into earthen mounds, which gave just the right soil composition for the seeds of other trees to germinate. A seed falls upon a down log, the seed grows into a tree, the log disintegrates often leaving hollow spaces at the base of the descendant that is born, through which the wind blows.

A local author, John, son of the late professor Tom Fritzell at Lawrence, has a cabin on Charnley Lake- my family lake up north. John wrote a poem about the beauty and mystery of a nurse log at his family's cabin. His nurse log graces our bulletin cover today. He writes:

The cedar stump that held  
my father's, the professor's, cocktails,  
and laid away his endless stories  
of errant shots and old spaniels,  
he would be glad to know,  
has become a nurse log,

its saw-shorn archival rings  
of cleavage

bog-like to the roots of seedlings,  
to a winding-sheet of thriving lichens,  
to a trembling colonnade of sporophytes  
on soft green lips of mosses,  
and to the spring grouse  
who, like I, with a breath to the eternal  
vacuum and a momentary boom  
now drum upon it.

- Poem and Photograph by John Fritzell

A tree with umbrella roots, whose origin we can no longer see, through whose roots the wind blows as it will, is truly a reason for wonder. Likewise, we are meant to wonder at the origin and birth right of our nourishment in Jesus Christ. With new eyes we see the story being told of life coming and going. With fresh insight we can guess at the unseen root system which anchors and collects the physical and spiritual nourishment we need for vitality and growth. With hearts flung open we dare to extend ourselves to communal relationships, like of The One who was sent by the Community of the Trinity to strengthen our lives and save us from eternal death. Our Giver is as real as the wind, our new life can be seen right before our eyes, the promises of the divine are glimpses where our kingdoms overlap.

One theologian concludes our scripture today is as much a conversation as a timeless theological treatise, and says this:

God's intention is never to condemn but to save, that is, to make life whole. Salvation language is health language, God's health for all the world in all of life's relationships. That love is ever constant, but never coercive. It is invitational and hopes for a

response, to complete the circle of love and share in the interconnectedness of the creating, liberating, healing trinity. – Paul Hammer

And you know, in the gospel of John, Nicodemus is one who comes to Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, in the middle of his ministry, then again at that end of Jesus earthly life- is this not this a model for relational discipleship? A presence that endures through the mystery, obscurity, fear, ambiguity, enigmatic seasons of this gift of a human journey?

*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.*

Friends, may our hearts be rooted in the mystery of our Triune God. May we be nursed by the renewal of the Creator-redeemer-and sustainer trusting in the enduring strength that follows. And may our unseen faith be our source of life today, holding us tightly in gratitude for each moment, and evidencing deep purpose and meaning. Amen.