

The Festival of the Most Holy Trinity
(June 6 – 7, 2009)
John 3:1-17
“The Depth of the Riches of God”

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Our text for is from the Gospel lesson just read from John chapter 3 as follows: Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

As many of you know, I am an Army Chaplain, along with serving this Parish. This brings me into contact with people from all walks of life, and from various educational backgrounds. It is there which really teach me where people in our world are at when it comes to religion and God. There are some Lutherans, some Roman Catholics, and many Pentecostals or Baptists tossed in to keep things interesting.

One of the first things I often do is talk about God and about Christianity. What is at the heart of the Christian faith? What does it mean to be a Christian? Inevitably, regardless whether the person is Roman Catholic or Lutheran, Baptist or Methodist or nothing at all, they almost without fail will say something along the lines of “Being a Christian means living a good life,” or something like that. Faith, for them, is basically about works and doing good things. Now these are intelligent people, often they are very faithful in attending their church. Yet they most often do not understand this very basic element of the Christian faith: The Christian faith is about Christ, what He did for you on the cross, and what He does for you now by creating faith through His Word and Sacraments. They don’t understand it. So for them, very often, the Bible is a closed book, and the Church is not a place of love and peace, but it is a place of guilt and heartache. They don’t get it.

This is basically where Nicodemus is in our text. He was a teacher of Israel and a wise man by everyone’s standards. But Jesus says to him that he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven unless He is born again. Now that word again there has a double meaning in the original Greek. It can also mean from above. So hear the text again: Unless one is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

This is a hard lesson for our friend Nicodemus. How much choice did you have in your birth? Did your parents consult you on when you would be born, what your name would be, or what kind of hospital you would be born in? I doubt it very much. Birth is a gift you receive from your parents. You don’t really have a lot of option in the matter. And it is better that way, because when you were born, you really didn’t have a lot to

contribute. What did you know about being born? Not very much.

But it is right here that Nicodemus stumbles. He had gone to church his whole life. He had studied the Scriptures. He was smart and successful. He was a leader of the Jewish people. It galled him to think that he had nothing to contribute to his salvation and the kingdom of God. He just couldn't understand this concept of the gift of God.

This is what you and I don't understand by nature, either. When it comes right down to it, we just want to do something. It can't be that easy. God can't simply forgive my sins for Jesus' sake. There must be something I have to do! But there isn't. For as long as you are trying to do it yourself, you are lost and condemned. You must be born from above. You cannot do it yourself. Perhaps St. Paul expressed it best in our Epistle lesson: Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

“For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?”(Romans 11:33-35)

Anytime you try to second guess God or think that you have it figured out beyond what He has given to you in the Scriptures, any time you try to do that, you are getting sucked back into the Law and living in the old way. This is why our text also speaks so much about Baptism, because Baptism teaches you that it is not about you, it is about what God gives you by faith. As Jesus said: unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Does it sound too easy? Well, I guess in one way it is. It is so easy to rest on the mercies of God. God is who He is, and He delights in giving you forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. That is His nature and His gift by grace.

But in another sense it is hard, very hard. It is very hard because if you live by faith and not by sight, you will be criticized and maligned your whole life. It's the truth. The Christian who lives by faith and not by works is a mystery to the world, just as much as the Holy Trinity is a mystery to the world. How can you live as though your sins don't matter? Well, they matter a great deal. They matter so much that Jesus had to die on the cross to pay the penalty for those sins. But Jesus has paid that penalty. I don't have to pay it again. The world can never truly understand that way of thinking.

Today (Yesterday) is the day when our country remembers her fallen heroes, those men and women who fought at Normandy to defend our country and its freedom. D Day is what we call it, and this is appropriate. These men and women sacrificed their lives so that we might be free. We should honor and remember them. There are many comrades and people that grieve over the loss of their loved ones and friends in battle. Maybe

some of you know that grief and understand it. Their sacrifice has been great. But perhaps that sacrifice can serve for us as a reminder of that one Great Sacrifice which God Himself made on our behalf, when He offered up His only-begotten Son for the sins of the world.

To Nicodemus, Jesus said that you must be born from above. To you He says the same. And your birth from above happened when you were baptized, and that great sacrifice which our Lord made came over you in the waters of life. God loved the world so much that He gave His Son over to death, so that everyone who believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. Everyone. That means my soldiers. That means your neighbors, even the ones you don't like. That means your family, your friends, your enemies. And most of all, that means you. For God so loved you that He gave Jesus to you so that you will not die, but live forever in His great eternal presence. Believe it for Jesus' sake. Amen.