

Don't You Understand?

John 3:1-17

It was another week of storms here in Iowa. The town of Greenfield in southwest Iowa was heavily damaged. My mother in law's house lost some trees. When faced with disasters like this, we often try to understand what happened, why it happened. We try to understand so that it won't happen again. We try to understand because we think if we understood everything we would have a sense of control over it.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and Pharisees thought that they understood God, but they tried to understand God in order to control. Pharisees kept the Law. Pharisees followed the Ten Commandments. Pharisees paid tithes, guarded the Sabbath, and strictly kept Old Testament regulations and requirements. Nicodemus was also a member of the Jewish ruling council—the Sanhedrin—the seventy-member Jewish Senate. The Sanhedrin judged people according to a book called the Mishnah. The Mishnah contains 613 commandments. As a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, if there was anyone who should have understood what God was up to in Jesus, it should have been Nicodemus.

Nicodemus first came to Jesus at night. More, however, is going on than just the time of day. Nicodemus is not just literally in the dark. He's figuratively in the dark. He doesn't understand what's going on. He doesn't understand what Jesus is teaching. He doesn't understand what God is doing in and through Jesus. He is in the dark.

Jesus knows this. He knows that Nicodemus doesn't understand. That's why Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). There is no chitchat here. No idle talk. Jesus

goes straight to the point. Jesus says our best won't do, our works won't work. We must be born again. In John 3:1–8, Jesus uses the term "born" eight times—eight times in eight verses! Do you think Jesus is trying to make a point?

How active were you when you were born? Were you talking on a cellphone with your mother, telling her when to push? Did the doctor ask you to measure the contractions and report from inside the womb? Did you place your hands against the top of the womb and push yourself out? Postpartum celebrations applaud the work of the mother, not the child. Mom gets a medal. The child gets a pacifier and a blanket!

Here's the point. We were all passive when we were born. We didn't do a thing. We weren't born because of what we did. Our mother did all the work. The same is true for our spiritual birth. God does all the work.

Do you know the most quoted Bible verse in America? "God helps those who help themselves." But there's a problem with that. It's not in the Bible! God doesn't help those who help themselves, because God knows we cannot help ourselves. God knows that He has to do 100 percent of the work! That's why Jesus uses "born" eight times in eight verses! "Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God' " (John 3:5). We are born again of water and the Spirit! And what's that called? Holy Baptism! The Holy Spirit is really present—in, with, and under the water—creating new life!

Martin Luther writes in his Small Catechism that Baptism "works forgiveness of sins,

rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare” (SC, Baptism, Second Part). The reformer writes in his Large Catechism, “There is no work done here by us, but a treasure, which God gives us and faith grasps” (LC IV 37). Also from his Large Catechism: “Here in Baptism there is freely brought to everyone’s door such a treasure and medicine that it utterly destroys death and preserves all people alive” (LC IV 43).

If you’ve been baptized, you have new eyes to see God’s beauty, a new mind to understand God’s Word, a new voice to sing God’s praises, new hands for service, and new feet to run the race of faith.

Nicodemus asked, “How can these things be?” (John 3:9). Jesus answered, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (John 3:10). As Israel’s teacher, Nicodemus should have understood that the Old Testament is all about God’s actions, not our own, even when we don’t fully understand what God is doing at work. God created everything. God called Abraham. God freed the people from slavery in Egypt. God led them to the Promised Land. God led them home after the Babylonian exile.

God is the Giver. Grace is His idea. Forgiveness comes from Him. Can God really be that generous? That loving? That giving? Yes. Yes. And yes! In John 3:16, Jesus doesn’t say, “whoever achieves” or “whoever succeeds.” Jesus says, “Whoever believes.”

Did Nicodemus believe? Maybe not right then, but the Holy Spirit wasn’t done with him yet. We don’t know for sure, but many have guessed that this wasn’t the only time Nicodemus met with Jesus in his search for

understanding. This isn’t the only time Nicodemus is mentioned. In John 7, he’s the only Pharisee who isn’t openly hostile to Jesus. And in John 19, he’s mentioned alongside Joseph of Arimathea as the ones who ask Pilate for Jesus’ body after the crucifixion, and begin the burial preparations. “Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight” (John 19:39). With the fulfillment on the cross of the prophecy that Jesus had made to Nicodemus that he would see the Son of Man lifted up (John 3:14), Nicodemus comes into the light. Nicodemus, the one who came in the dark, now lives in the light. The one who crept through the shadows now comes to the cross.

That’s true for all of the baptized. We celebrate that we are born again of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). Water and Spirit appear together first in Genesis 1:2, “The Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” Just so, the Holy Spirit is present in the water when we are baptized in the name of our triune God. Like Nicodemus, we, too, are born from above, born again.

Being baptized and the Christian life go hand in hand. In his Large Catechism, Martin Luther writes, “Every Christian has enough in Baptism to learn and to do all his life” (LC IV 41). Luther connects being baptized with the life of faith. It is the “present tense” of Baptism. Again, from his Large Catechism, “We must think this way about Baptism and make it profitable for ourselves. So when our sins and conscience oppress us, we strengthen ourselves and take comfort and say, ‘Nevertheless, I am baptized’ ” (LC IV 44).

We hear this Gospel lesson as we remember Trinity Sunday. We remember how God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; not three Gods,

but one God. And like some other parts of faith, the Trinity can be hard to understand. We're often left to using metaphors like a clover or an apple or the phases of water to try to understand, but each of those falls short, and can even lead us into heresies and error. But as we watch Nicodemus struggling to understand how God is at work in Jesus, as we struggle to understand how God is at work in the world, we know we're not alone. We know that it's ok that we don't always fully understand.

Knowing there's a God who loves us, cares for us, sent Jesus to die for us, and sends the Holy Spirit on us to bring us to faith and keep us in faith is enough.

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