

“Asking for a Friend”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
May 30, 2021  
Trinity Sunday

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Isaiah 6:1-8  
John 3:1-17

In today’s gospel passage, we have **each person** of the Trinity: **Jesus**, who is talking to Nicodemus; **God**, whom Nicodemus-- an observant Jew, a Pharisee-- clearly longs to find connection with; and the **Holy Spirit**, who seems to be, according to Jesus, the one who births us into the kingdom of God. The gospel tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus *by* night, not *at* night, which implies he wanted the darkness to cover him in what he was asking. Maybe he did not want to be exposed for having such questions. Maybe he did not want to be responsible for the answers and how they might change his life. Maybe he was just “asking for a friend”.

Like Nicodemus, we may all be wondering, “How can these things be?” This day of the liturgical calendar celebrates the three-in-one nature of God. We may say, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; or Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Each person of the Trinity, our church doctrine tells us, is equal in importance, power, and holiness. But as I have heard others in our church discuss the Trinity, they are glad enough for the church to have this doctrine, but many a) may not believe it for themselves, or b) may not understand what it actually means.

In our Christian identity, three things bind us to the faith: How we believe; how we behave; and how we belong. One often shapes the other. For some, they belong here because of what we believe. I’ve had people visiting who say they checked out our website, with a litmus test to get a sense of our *beliefs*, with certain things they check off the list: Do we talk about Jesus? Or, Do we believe LGBTQ people should be welcomed and affirmed? How do we do baptism and communion?

For others, their entry point into the church is about *belonging*. Perhaps they came here because someone first invited them. Or they came here visiting on their own, but it was because they got wrapped into the friendship and care of this community, they stuck around. One core teaching of our Reformed confessions also speaks of belonging. The idea that in life, and in death, we *belong* to God-- connects us not only to one another, but also to something that is much bigger than we can be on our own. It also reminds us that we do not belong to our jobs; we do not belong to our oppressors; we do not belong to our pain or resentments; God alone is sovereign above all those things.

Then we look at how we *behave*. For some, it is *because* we are Christian that we choose to feed the hungry, stand against racism, care for the environment. It is *because* we follow Christ that we pray, we attend church, we practice forgiveness of others and ourselves. For others, it

is because you do these things that you are drawn to a worshipping community that embraces similar values.

I don't really think God cares whether we connect first through belonging, belief, or behavior-- or which most feeds the others. Hopefully we have some experience of each of these three.

Before we leave that idea of *belief*, let's try to understand more of that Trinitarian nature of God we celebrate today. To do that, let us first review what we know about the Oneness of God. "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord, *is one*. Love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength," the Great Commandment in Deuteronomy 6:4 tells us. The great religions of Abraham-- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all see themselves as *monotheistic*-- that is, believing in *one* God.

But in our earlier scriptures, God's people were *monolatristic* rather than *monotheistic*. That is, they believed in many gods and goddesses, but they chose to worship only one God-- the God of Abraham-- out of all their many options. They believed the Canaanite god Baal existed, for instance, but chose to worship God instead.

The early Hebrew bible looked at God in relation and in contrast to the other gods and goddesses of the Canaanites, Babylonians, and other cultures surrounding Hebrew identity. By the time King Josiah ruled in the 7th century BCE, Judah had started to see God more strictly as the *only* God who existed. By then, their understanding of the one, true God had incorporated the positive qualities of the gods and goddesses of the surrounding cultures.

God is one. But oneness can incorporate many things. In Islam, God is believed to have 99 names in the Quran-- names like "*The One Who Sees*" and "*The Gatherer*" and "*The Source of Peace*"-- and reciting all these names brings great religious benefit for devout Muslims. As I read these 99 names for Allah, I see reflections of what Christians also value about God. In Sufism, which is a form of Islamic mysticism, the meditative practice of the whirling dervish also demonstrates the oneness of God. The whirling begins with the arms crossed over the chest, to show the unity of God. Then, as the dervish spins, the right hand points to the sky, to receive God's blessing, and the left hand reaches toward the earth, making a bridge between heaven and earth and drawing everything in-between into the oneness of God.

But how can God, who is one, also be three?

The *doctrine* of the Trinity first appeared in the third century CE by Tertullian, the early church father from the city of Carthage, in northern Africa. However, looking back at scripture, we can see Jesus and the Holy Spirit popping out of the pages in holy ways, even if the scripture writers did not yet define it as such. We have all looked back on our lives and in hindsight saw things that had been there all along, but which in the moment we had never named as such.

Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus adds a fourth element to the concepts of **belief, belonging, and behavior**. Jesus tells us also about *birth*. "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit."

Now where I grew up, this idea of being born of the spirit-- or as they say in the Bible Belt, born again, was a litmus test of its own. When I would be in casual conversation with someone and mention that I went to church, I'd often get the question, "When were you saved?" They wanted to know when I was born again-- that is, when I had a sudden understanding of when Jesus' salvation washed over me. I knew what they wanted to hear from me. And usually, it involved lots of blood: my depth of gratitude for Jesus' blood poured out for me--at least, that was how the faith formula went. Usually, there would be a story to go with it: I kind of looked forward to these testimonies, because they were mildly entertaining. Someone would talk about their life, and usually there was an accident, addiction, or abandonment that sent them into the pit of despair and bad behavior but then Jesus grabbed them by the scruff of their necks and pulled them out. Now, these were the days before reality TV or widespread internet, so for a teenager, to hear about someone whose life had been a train wreck definitely captured our attention. And in comparison, it made whatever we were ashamed about seem like no big deal. Hey, if Jesus could save *that guy*, surely Jesus could save me!

*But I always thought there was more to the story.* And maybe Nicodemus did too-- which made him come to Jesus by night looking for meaning. But his rebirth seemed gradual; he did not leave that conversation with Jesus as a changed man. He stuck around with the Pharisees even as they judged Jesus, although, later in John, when the Pharisees called for Jesus' arrest, Nicodemus gives a weak protest, asking "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" We only hear from Nicodemus once more after that, when he shows up at Jesus' tomb bearing embalming spices and helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial. By then, maybe he had awakened to the Spirit born in him. *Was it too late?* I suspect not.

I wonder how Nicodemus would respond had been in the presence of the seraphs surrounding God's throne, hearing them chanting, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!" while smoke filled the house and the doorways shook. If Jesus handed Nicodemus his message about new birth like a burning coal to his mouth, as happened in the prophet Isaiah's call, I don't think Nicodemus would have taken so long to respond to Jesus' invitation. You can't quite chew on a burning coal to see how it feels in your mouth before you decide what to say next.

We all know of babies who came into the world suddenly, sliding into the world with surprising, insistent quickness. Like Isaiah with the burning coal to his mouth, they announce, "Here I am!" But most births aren't like that. They involve pacing back and forth. Waiting. Deep breathing, sometimes groaning. More waiting. Sometimes, they must be torn out from the womb. My daughter came nearly a week after her due date, and that was only *after* I was induced. The fact that she cried non-stop for the first 6 months of life made us joke that she wanted to go back into the womb.

The truth is, we don't get to choose the conditions of our own birth. That is a grace-- a spiritual gift that we can neither earn nor plan.

I once had a teenager in my church, Millie, who had it all planned. She was a top student in her school and lived life fully: she dreamed in Latin verse, won theater awards for her performances in school theater; she was on the school synchronized swimming team; and was president of our church youth group. She had the admiration of her peers and teachers too. But somewhere in the midst of her senior year, she was gripped with a debilitating depression and anxiety. On days she wasn't paralyzed by anxiety, she was thinking of harming herself. As I learned from talking to her family, this was genetic. She was third generation in the line of women in her family with clinical depression. Thankfully, that prepared her family to act; Millie went into in-patient mental health treatment and got very good therapy. Once she found a place of stability, it was time to return to school and to church and to some of the relationships she had burned due to her depression. That was terrifying; she not only feared facing all these people and pressures again; she also feared what she now knew her mind could do if she couldn't handle it.

I wanted Millie to know that the waters of baptism would help hold her up. She was not only born of water, but also of the Spirit. And so, the weekend before her return to school, we arranged a blessing for her in the church chapel. We invited just a few people: her family, one of her Sunday School teachers who had known her her whole life; a youth advisor, and a couple of kids from the youth group. Each person brought a small gift that represented something they loved about Millie, and shared it as part of the blessing. Millie was reminded how much she is beloved. And she was able to carry that into the rest of her senior year-- a more subdued year, but one in which I saw that spark within her eventually return.

"For God so loved the world," Jesus tells us. This love is persistent. It will find us. And by the Spirit, it will make us new.