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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, May 30, 2021**  
**Holy Trinity /Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B**  
**First Reading: Isaiah 6:1-8**  
**Second Reading: Romans 8:12-17**  
**Gospel Reading: John 3:1-17**  
**Sermon Title: “How can these things be?”**

## **Theme**

*Jesus’ miracles prompt Nicodemus to visit him in secrecy. Jesus tells him about being born of the Spirit and about the Son who has been sent by God to save.*

## **Text**

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

<sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup>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.” <sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup>“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>“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.

<sup>17</sup>“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

## Sermon

In the last couple of weeks, Thomas and I have been distracted from our normal work by odd jobs around ZCELC that, at first glance, looked like pesky little jobs that we could knock out in just a few minutes.

The Bye Bye Buggy is a large stroller that holds up to four babies and the school uses it to take our youngest children on a stroll outside the building when weather permits. One of the back wheels had a bearing that was worn out and so I asked Michelle to contact the company and see what it would take to fix it. Her response to me was like \$279. “How can these things be?” I asked. She told me that the manufacturer wouldn't sell me the bearing, only the entire wheel, and then the wheels only came in sets. I sourced the bearings and between Gary the owner of the Gulf station on the corner and Thomas and me, we fixed the Bye-Bye Buggy for like \$25.

One of the swings on the playground broke and so I asked Michelle to order the part I had spec'd out, which she did. When it arrived, Thomas and I got on it, because those kids like to swing. We took the broken swing apart and I decided it would be best to replace the nuts, bolts, and washers that hold it all together so I went next door to the hardware store, bought the parts, and brought them back. By that time, Thomas had the old hangers disassembled. I looked up and saw that the size of the hole for the old mating part was smaller than the new mating part. “How can these things be?” I thought to myself. Why would there be two different sizes of swing hangers? So we decided the easiest thing to do was drill out the hole, but that required another trip next door to the hardware store to buy a drill, and then we finished the repair to the swing.

Well, I hope you appreciated those stories. Maybe you can relate. Maybe you have found yourself in a position where what you were hearing or seeing just didn't make sense, harder to understand than it needed to be, and you said to yourself, "How can this be?"

You probably recognize that that question came from the Gospel Reading in which Jesus told something to Nicodemus the Pharisee that made no sense to him.

As a God-fearing observant Jew, Nicodemus thought he understood who God was. God was the angry score-keeping God that he and his fellow Jews needed to placate with their sacrifices on the altar at the Temple. But if he thought engaging Jesus face to face was going to bring greater clarification on who Jesus was, what he got was another thing altogether, because not only did he not get clarification on who Jesus was, Jesus further obfuscated the visit by interjecting another being whom Jesus called, "the Spirit."

Well, folks, today is Holy Trinity Sunday. Allow me to say that it is my least favorite day on the liturgical calendar and that is because the Holy Trinity is a mystery that has defied adequate definition for the entire Christian era.

And while my attempt to bring clarity to the concept will certainly *not* bring clarity and will likely bore you, bear with me for a couple of minutes while I do indeed attempt, because my attempt will serve my conclusion.

coeternal – equally eternal; not one person preceded or created the others

consubstantial - of the same substance, essence, or nature

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity holds that God is one God, but three *coeternal* and *consubstantial* persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

*Coeternal* is a word made up by theologians to explain that there is no seniority among the three persons of the Trinity; they are equally eternal; meaning that not one person preceded or created the others; they simply have always existed.

*Consubstantial* is also a word that theologians have made up which means of the same substance, essence, or nature. The three persons of the Trinity are distinct, yet are one substance, essence, or nature.

The subset of Christianity that accepts this doctrine is collectively known as *Trinitarianism*, and Lutheranism as well as all main-line denominations are part of this subset. And since you are going to ask, some non-Trinitarian churches include the Mormons, Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Scientology.

While the doctrine of the Trinity nor the word Trinity is explicit in the books of the Bible, the New Testament does demonstrate a *triadic* understanding of God and

contains several Trinitarian formulas. Today's Gospel Reading, for example, contains references to all three persons of the Trinity, even if Jesus never used that name.

The doctrine of the Trinity was first formulated among the early Christians and patriarchs of the Church beginning with the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, from which came the Nicene Creed, as an early attempt to understand the relationship between God, whom Jesus identified as the Father, himself as God's Son, and the Holy Spirit, whom he would send to continue to guide his followers in the continuance of his ministry.

Now, have I cleared it up for you? Probably not, and why did I put you through all that? I am so glad you asked.

The answer is one easily understood word, love. That's right, love. God the Trinity, in God the Trinity's genius, created us out of love, and every interaction with us is initiated out of love. And as difficult as it is to try to explain God, as big a concept as God is, God loves us and interacts with us out of God's love; first as our Creator, later as our Redeemer, and now as our Sanctifier.

Nicodemus, the learned Pharisee, as a representative of Judaism, was wrong about who and what God the Father is. Jesus, God the Son, came to reveal the true nature of God the Father. And when his work was done, he did not just leave us to do the best we can. He sent us God the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us to continue God the Son's ministry. And God the Trinity did and continues to do all this out of love, so that at the end of the age, God can take all of us to God's self to live in perfect holy communion for eternity. "How can these things be?" you ask. I know, it's mind-blowing, isn't it? But God does all this out of God's great love.

No one has ever expressed this better than Jesus himself, when he said at the end of this passage,

<sup>16</sup>“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.

<sup>17</sup>“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

## **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

The concepts, doctrines, and terminology the Church has come up with to attempt to explain all this are more complicated than they need to be, and I apologize for my feeble attempt. Just remember this. God revealed in Jesus Christ is love, and you'll be fine.

## **Prayer**

Holy God, Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We praise you for your genius. We worship you for your divinity. And we are humbled and thank you for your love, grace, and mercy. Amen