

Sunday of the Holy Trinity, June 7, 2009
Church of the Reformation—Lutheran, Affton, MO
Text: John 3:1—17

A God Too Small

On this first Sunday after Pentecost, the Sunday of the Holy Trinity, we confess the incomprehensible, that God is one divine Being in three divine Persons, a Unity in Trinity and a Trinity in Unity, or as we call it—*tri-une*—“**neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance.**” Though we confess this doctrine every year on Holy Trinity Sunday, we still find it a bit confusing, let alone, tongue-twisting. Yet we continue baptizing children and adults in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; we invoke that name at the beginning of worship, at the beginning of the day, and at the close of the day. Though we confess, baptize, and invoke the Triune name of God, we never seem to come any closer to wrapping our minds around it all—at least not on this side of the great resurrection. Three distinct persons, yet only one God, one divine Being. It is perplexing, something we can’t rationalize; we can only believe it and confess it.

Adding to the confusion of this day are the confusing concepts of God that are advertised and promoted by spiritual gurus and preachers, concepts we ourselves sometimes hold. Almost sixty years ago, an English clergyman, J. B. Phillips, wrote a durable and popular little book entitled, *Your God Is Too Small*. He says that we too often worship a concept of God we learned as children in Sunday school, worshiping a god slightly larger than our own projected image, a magnification of our own good qualities—God as a policeman, an old man who is good but forgetful, a god in a box to be used when necessary. Even when we try to explain the Triune God

by using the equal-sided triangle or a three dimensional cube, we are trying to put God into a form or concept that we can fit neatly inside our heads.

Perhaps Wilbur Reeves captures in his poem a view of God popular in culture and in our lives:

I'd like to buy three dollars' worth of God, please.
Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,
but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk
or a snooze in the sunshine.
I want ecstasy, not transformation.
I want the warmth of the womb, not a rebirth.
I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack.
I'd like to buy about three dollars' worth of God, please.

That is a god too small, a god too small to deal with the despair, disease, and death in our lives, a god too small to deal with our sin. A god too small is at the root of the thinking of Nicodemus. He has heard about Jesus and the water turned into wine, the deaf hear, the mute speak, the demons cast out. He wants to know how all of this can be, how does this all happen. He wants a small god that he can understand, and perhaps even control..

Jesus ignores his questions and says to Nicodemus, **“Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”** (3:4)—in other words, “You need to become something completely new, a new creation—something that no rules, regulations, or morality can accomplish.” The

puzzlement of Nicodemus' "How can this be?" is met with the clarity of Jesus: **"Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.** You see, what is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't be amazed. You can't rationalize this or find a box to put it in. In fact, you can no more box up the Spirit than you can capture the wind. All you can do is listen, hear the voice of Spirit preaching to you, and believe it."

That Spirit helps us see and confess that the three persons of the Godhead—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—forever are working in concert with each other. The persons of the Trinity do not conflict with one another nor do they compete with one another. The Father, out of love for the world, sends the Son. The Son is lifted up to die for the sake of the life of the world. The Spirit helps us see, believe, and confess that the work of the Son in His death and resurrection is for our salvation. This God is not too small to deal with your sin, your guilt, your death.

So we are to be born of water and the Spirit. However, being born anew from above doesn't mean you get to decide, anymore than you got to decide to be born the first time. If you were baptized as an infant, no one consulted you about being reborn. Even if you came to faith as an adult and were baptized after that, it is still all God's doing and not yours. You must be born anew, because you were first born in the darkness of sin, like Nicodemus or Isaiah. In fact you were born dead in sin. If you inherited anything in that birth, you inherited your father Adam's sin. Flesh begets flesh, and sinful flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. You can't fix it. You must die and rise. You must be born anew, born from above. Not a second birth in the flesh, but a new, heavenly, spiritual birth, this time of the Holy Spirit. Your first birth made you a child of father Adam. Your new birth in Jesus makes you a child of God.

“How can these things be?” How could Nicodemus know that the One who was talking to him would one day hang in the darkness of a Friday, of a day turned to night, to take away the sin of the world? How could Nicodemus know that three days later the same Jesus would rise from the dead to bring the world into the dawn of the first day of the new creation? Only by the Spirit of God working in him would he know this. Only by the Spirit working in him would Nicodemus know that this God is not too small to deal with sin and death.

Just as the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of creation, so wherever there is water and the Spirit there is a new creation in Christ the Word. What Christ accomplished for the whole world in His death and resurrection, He does for you personally in the water of Baptism. If you are baptized you have evidence from God Himself that you are a new creature in Jesus. Christ was lifted up for you, and in Him you are lifted up to the right hand of the Father. He wants you to take Him at His word, to trust Him, that you are His new creation. The old is gone, the new has come. Sin is past; righteousness and holiness are your future. You are a child of God, a member of His family. The Son invites you to pray with Him, “**Our Father.**” The Spirit cries out with your spirit, “**Abba, Father.**” And the Spirit gives you the faith to believe and confess that through all of your sufferings, your failings, your weaknesses, your sins, you are loved by the Father, through His Son Jesus, in the Holy Spirit. Is that God too small? Not in the least, for in the Triune love of God, you will live forever.

Henry V. Gerike