

Gospel Reading – **John 3:1-17**

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² 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 unless God is with that person.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴ 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?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸ 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.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ “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. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ “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. ¹⁷ “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.”

Message

Grace to you, and peace, from the One who journeys with us in wilderness places, who shows us a way of prayer and discipline in living, and who is with us to the end, Jesus Christ, Amen.

I must say, I struggle with the “born from above” kind of language. Mostly because, at the risk of being offensive, *we tend to think like Nicodemus when we need to think like Jesus!*

Here’s the thing... we have two sacraments. That’s what we – Lutherans – lift up. Baptism and Communion. “*What is a sacrament?*” you may ask? Put simply, it’s an earthly element combined with a divine command. In baptism, the earthly element is, of course, water. And the divine command is found at the end of Matthew’s gospel,

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (MT 28:19). In Communion, the earthly elements are wheat and grapes, or bread and wine, and we hear the divine command, “do this in remembrance of me” in the story of the Last Supper in Luke (22:19). We also speak of sacraments as a “means of God’s grace.” That is, we experience the grace of God in the sacraments – a reminder that we are each God’s beloved child as we experience the waters of baptism, and as we are fed at the Table. We speak of baptism and Communion, with their earthly elements that are so common, as being tangible reminders that God’s grace extends to us, no matter who we are or how gracious we are – God’s grace can be felt by anyone in the sacraments. In other traditions, other moments in life are held up as sacraments as well; in essence, they are occasions we hold with respect, and we honour these occasions as we encounter them.

Now, in our human attempts to set ourselves apart, we’ve sometimes *used* sacraments to judge who is “in” and who is “out.” And we’ve gone so far as to even declare who is *worthy* of baptism or Communion, and who *isn’t*. If we’re talking about God’s grace, and we’re talking about a tangible reminder of the grace of God in our lives, how can we ever prevent someone from being welcomed to the font or the Table? And yet, we have.

In Lent, we also hear the story of Jesus’ sojourn in the wilderness, and he is tempted by this *incarnation of evil* placing conditions on God’s grace in front of him: “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread... If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down [off this high place]... if you will fall down and worship me [I’ll give you all the kingdoms of the world].” (MT 4:1-11) The evil one knows where and when our weaknesses are, and the evil one exploits them. By contrast, the gracious One – embodied in the person of Jesus Christ – knows we are vulnerable, knows we will falter, and says, *come and be cleansed, come and be fed, come as you are... go and share this good news with a world in need.*

As we gather around the Table for a piece of bread and a sip of wine – sharing from the same loaf and same cup, recognizing our common need for sustenance on the

journey, recognizing our common need for a part in the abundance God provides, and sharing a glimpse of a day where justice and peace might hold sway – as we gather to share this simple meal, we do so in a way that welcomes *all*. No one is turned away. No matter our assessment of whether someone *should* receive or not, no matter whether we have a check-list where a person meets the criteria or not, God's welcome is not ours to police.

At the Table, and at the font, God's welcome is radical and beyond what we would offer. And the challenge becomes: can we *come close* to offering such a radical welcome in our community, so a person who is moved to show up here might catch a glimpse of God's grace among us?

The grace of God shines a light on darkness. It can be a convicting thing, when we stop and think about it. It convicts us because it brings to light the times when we *haven't* been gracious.

You can think of moments in your personal life or congregational life, but it doesn't take much to think about times in our wider church life and history where we've prevented people from sharing fully in the life of our Christian communities. Whether we're talking about gender, or sexual orientation, or race, or age, or whatever other distinctions you can think of.

And perhaps that accounts for decline in our churches! ...those places where we've tried to manage God's grace – who gets it and how much. And perhaps we're being challenged, in our time and place, to creatively welcome once again. ...to lift up the story of One who came among us and showed us a way of grace that we, people, had never experienced before or since. ...to *include* in those moments of grace at the font and the Table those who we *haven't included* before.

Since we're at the start of March, I want to invite you to lift up three occasions, this month, that can be a way to connect faith and society around – and perhaps even create a space of welcome for someone who hadn't felt welcome before. *International Women's Day* is on March 8th, and it's an occasion to celebrate the achievements of women as well as a call to recognize and work against oppression of women in our society and around the world. March 21st is the *International Day for the Elimination of*

Racial Discrimination and it lifts up democracy and equal human rights for all. The following day, March 22nd, is *World Water Day*, which is meant to advocate for the sustainable management of freshwater resources – water, being something we can't live without. (In addition to these three occasions in society, you are encouraged to be aware of – and even seek out a place to join in a service – for *World Day of Prayer* [a global ecumenical movement led by Christian women who welcome you to join in prayer and action for peace and justice], and this observance takes place on the first Friday of March, so March 6th, this year.)

These, and other occasions of social justice and environmental concern, can bring us together, and we can hold up what we take in faith as these have meaning in our society.

Now, as I began, I said *we tend to think like Nicodemus when we need to think like Jesus* – let me come back to that, here.

Look at what Nicodemus says and does... he's a Pharisee – that is, a scholarly Jew with an emphasis on personal piety who taught that all Jews should observe the law of the Torah (<https://www.gotquestions.org/Pharisees.html>). We're told in the story that Nicodemus approaches Jesus at night... *a bit odd, no?* That indicates some trepidation on his part! But he begins by acknowledging Jesus' special nature, "you are a teacher who has come from God," he says – certainly not something expected from a Pharisee! It's when Jesus uses the term "born from above" that Nicodemus goes down a rigid path – "how can that be?" and Nicodemus does his rigid, literal thing. As soon as the word "born" enters into it, he can only think of the biological act. "How can these things be?" he asks.

But can *we* be opened in *our* thinking... as Jesus invites Nicodemus to do! Jesus says to Nicodemus, "do not be astonished that I said 'you must be born from above.'" Then, after speaking of flesh and spirit, and the kingdom of God, Jesus challenges Nicodemus, "are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

What a question that is! "Are you teaching something you don't even understand? ...are you just parroting things in a rigid, legalistic way, and causing

people to feel bound instead of free?” Jesus is inviting Nicodemus, and us, to consider our neighbour in a new light.

The well-known verse that follows is a summary of how we might view the divine-human relationship – something that rigid thinkers would struggle with. “For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

And, perhaps knowing that a rigid thinker might want to turn a *statement of grace* into a *rule to exclude*, the culminating verse spoken by Jesus follows to hammer it home: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (JN 3:17)

Sometimes we want to make the life of Jesus into the short statement, “he died for us,” and we oversimplify our faith and our part in it. Over and over, the scriptures point to how we are invited to live differently as a result of our encounter with Christ. Indeed, the tangible reminder of grace we receive in the water, in the bread and wine, is a way forward that is alternative to how society can be, and invites us to live differently. The world is saved through Jesus when Jesus’ followers take up their baptismal calling to *live grace into the world*.

Our *flesh-ways* of doing things are countered by *Spirit-ways* when we love our neighbour, when we see the humanity in others, when we care for people and planet... when we work towards justice and peace, and God’s abundance shared by all. These are freeing things. We are called to work towards a day where all are free, where all receive of the abundance God provides for all.

Because, God loves the world. Our salvation is accomplished through the life of Christ, and *we receive* the life and presence of Christ *to be* the Body in the world.

Liberating God of grace, be with us through these days of Lent.

Point us in a new way, turn our hearts to need close-by and around the world.

May we let go of old ways that keep us from our neighbour,

May we be opened that we may see what is in our grasp,

And to see what is beyond the grasp of others,

that, knowing you so love the world,

we might work towards a day of justice and peace that you desire for all.

In gratitude for the life of Christ, we pray,

Amen.