**John 3:1-15 (selected verses)** May 27, 2018

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Trinity Sunday (Pentecost 1)

*John3:1Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”*

*3In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’” 4“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” 5Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit…*

*14Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**“Are You Saying I’m Not Good Enough?”**

If you ever hear that, you are in trouble. I’m not saying that to be funny. If you are ever in a conversation and someone says to you, “Are you saying I’m not good enough?” you have lost the battle for hearts and minds, and now, the entire war hangs on the next sentence. This disagreement is about to go nuclear.

Whether or not it’s what you think about that person, it is what they think you think about them. And if you do not walk back your statements, It. Is. Over.

**I. It’s A Message that Even the Best of Us Need to Hear**

A man had come to Jesus seeking answers, ***“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”*** Nicodemus is captivated by Jesus: his words, his works, his message. He wants to know more. Nicodemus does what we all do when we meet great people whom we admire. He says good things about Jesus—because he really does think good things about Jesus. “Teacher, you are wise! You are powerful! Can I just tell you what a privilege it is to actually get to talk to you?”

You kind of expect Jesus to do what important, note-worthy people do when they encounter their supporters. Jesus is supposed to give a self-deprecating “Thank you. I really appreciate your support” and then say nice things back to him. But Jesus doesn’t! ***“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”*** “Nicodemus, you say nice things about God and about me, but you have a problem. You need a radical change. Be born again.”

Probably not what he expected. Nicodemus does his best to not be insulted—which is good because Jesus was not insulting but frankly stating the dire situation: “You must be born again.” Nicodemus mans-up and asks ***“How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”*** I don’t think that Nicodemus is being dense. I think he is just struggling to understand.

But Jesus knows something about Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. And the Pharisees’ approach to getting to heaven is that you *are* good enough, if only you will try hard enough. This talk about being born again, starting all over, sounds like Jesus is telling Nicodemus—a religious teacher and moral man—that he isn’t good enough! He does not need a mere course correction, to get a point or two straightened out. He needs to throw it all away, to start over, to become a baby again!

I don’t know what Nicodemus thought, but I know what I would be thinking. I know what you would be thinking. “Hey, I have lived a good, decent life. Just ask my wife, my kids, my employer. Ask my neighbors, the homeless guy I gave a ride to, the church elders.” Jesus says, “Do over!” “Jesus, are you saying that I’m not good enough?”

That is what he is saying.

Jesus’ message is the same message that we carry out into the world, and it elicits the same response. When we talk about Jesus as a Savior, what we are saying is that people are not good enough, not good enough for God. If people were good enough, they would not need a Savior. “Savior” means “You need saving.” A savior means that our righteous deeds, the good things we think we have done—you know how good it makes you feel when you help someone, when you are virtuous and good—Jesus says it is all blood soaked rags that are thrown in the biohazard bags at the hospital. It is filth, disease. You need to be born again.

Jesus is doing something painful to Nicodemus. And this painful procedure must be performed on every single person who wants to be saved. We need to realize and submit to the truth that we, in our sinful flesh with its lustful desires, it selfish outlook on life, its love of gossip and revenge, we are not good enough for God. Not even close. It is a painful process that is most happily learned when our minds are young, when we have not built a life on doing what we think is right.

This is what Jesus means when he says, ***“Flesh gives birth to flesh but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”*** We are born into this world deficient. No, far worse than that, we are defiled. And it doesn’t matter whether you think you are born into this world LGB or T or straight, with a pre-disposition to alcoholism or sober, lazy or hard-working, short-tempered or easy-going, kind or hard-hearted. Whatever traits you are born with, it is all sin. It is damnable sin. Jesus says that however we are born into this world, ***“No one can enter the kingdom of God.”***

That is a tough message. It has always been a tough message. No one likes to hear that. But how much more so when we are force-fed the message of self-esteem with our mother’s milk. When we are told that we are wonderful, that everything we do is wonderful. God never says that. Jesus doesn’t either. He says, “You must be born again.”

Don’t be surprised that sharing the real message about Jesus does not usually make people all happy and gushy. Don’t be surprised that when you touch the sore spot of sin in a person’s life that their reflex is to whack your hand.

**II. It’s a Message that Prepares Us for One Who Is Good Enough**

But when self-esteem is a foundation stone of our society, you get two types of people. One type is the arrogant people who think a lot more of themselves than they should. It is difficult to reach them, though God can work with them and we should not be silent before them.

But you also get guilt-ridden people who walk around knowing the truth. They know that deep down they don’t feel as good as the world says they are. They just kind of hope no one ever finds out. Often they smile, they accept the awards, the pat on the back, and all the while they feel a little bit like victims of survivor syndrome—that all the good you have in life is a lie, stolen. For such people, God’s verdict of “You are not good enough” rings true. When God’s law brings us to that point, then we are ready to be born again in the Holy Spirit.

The way God the Holy Spirit works is to speak through God’s Word. Let’s explore that.

I don’t know how much you pay attention to what Sunday of the church year it is. Pastors pay lots of attention to it, I guess that most others don’t. We all have things like that in life: things we follow, but most others don’t.

About 10 years ago we stayed at the house of a man whose business was alternative fuels, bio-fuels. At that exact point in time, oil was at its record high of over $140 a barrel. Life was looking very, very good for this man. When we arrived at his house and we talked about his job, I made an off-hand comment that as we were driving in, we had just heard on the radio that oil had dropped by something like $5 on the day. If ever I thought someone pants were on fire, it was this man. He immediately dropped the conversation, got out his cell phone and checked prices. That day was the beginning of a six month 75% drop in oil price. We didn’t keep in touch, but I imagine that was very bad for his business. Some people pay attention to oil prices and some people don’t.

Some people pay attention to the Sundays of the church year. Some, not so much. But this Sunday is one you should. This Sunday is a turning point in the church year. This is the first Sunday after Pentecost. From now till November you will watch the bulletin cover say “Pentecost 2, Pentecost 3, Pentecost 4” up to about Pentecost 20 or so. The paraments which are white this week will be changed to green next week and stay green for 20 weeks or more. It feels like the church year has come to a dead stop.

Here’s what is happening. The Christian church year is divided basically into two halves: From December to May we remember the main events of Jesus’ life: His birth, his ministry, his suffering, death and resurrection. That half of the church year focuses on what Jesus did to save us. Starting this week, we start the other half of the church year. For these six months we focus on what God wants us to believe and how to act. We focus on the content of faith, what the Holy Spirit works in our hearts.

And so today’s reading is very appropriate. Jesus after explaining to Nicodemus that he had to be receptive to the Holy Spirit’s work, and now he gets down to the Holy Spirit’s message ***“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”***

What is Jesus talking about—that snake in the desert thing? When God’s people, the Israelites were traveling through the desert from their land of slavery to the land of promise, they complained bitterly and repeatedly about what God was doing. Finally God sent snakes into their camp as a punishment. When they cried out for mercy, God had Moses raise up a hand-crafted brass snake on a high pole. God said that whoever looked to that snake would be cured.

That is just who Jesus is. He explains to Nicodemus that the core of saving faith is that we have a deadly problem. And the only way to be saved from that problem is to look to God’s appointed way to be saved. Look to Christ Jesus lifted up on a cross as the sacrifice for sin. It is not won achieved. It is not our doing. But simply trusting that what God has said about Jesus is true.

Jesus says, ***“No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit…”*** And how the Spirit gives us birth is by putting faith in our hearts in this truth: ***“The Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”*** In order to enter God the Father’s kingdom, God the Holy Spirit must create faith in our hearts in God the Son as our savior from sin.

If you read through the book of John, Nicodemus is a subplot of the Gospel. Nicodemus did not do what people usually do when someone tells them, “You, by yourself, are not good enough!” By the Holy Spirit’s working, Nicodemus kept on listening. Later he defended Jesus before his detractors (7:50) and finally he among the faithful few who stuck with Jesus at the cross. Then Nicodemus risked great loss and lovingly buried the one he had come to know as Savior (19:39). If Jesus had just left Nicodemus to go on his own like rock stars and athletes and politicians do with their fans, if he had just told Nicodemus, “Hey, man, thanks for your support. I appreciate all you do.” Nicodemus would never have come to the faith.

There is a time to gently, yet firmly say, “No, you are not good enough. Not good enough for God. But God has created a way that you may become the joy of his heart. Let me tell you about it…” Amen.