

Trinity Sunday, Gospel Year B

Healing Hands

John 3: 1 -17

Trinity Sunday

Analysis by Matt Metevelis

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 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?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

"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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever

believes in him may have eternal life.

“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.

“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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

DIAGNOSIS: It's All in Our Hands



Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): A Post-Authority Era

The stakes are high in this text. The grand ideas of the theological discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus dazzle us. Rebirth, the Spirit, and the memorable and remarkable declaration of God's love for the world dominate the conversation. We're taken right out of the scene and into the themes. But we should be on guard about running straight into theology as this is not just a late-night study session. John identifies Nicodemus as a "ruler" (gr. *arkon*) among the Jews. He makes a confession about Jesus that he is "a teacher come from God." Jesus bases his seeming exhortation "to be born again" in the desire to "see the kingdom of God." The issues here are not just theological. They are political. One man in authority approaches another man to either recognize or interrogate him about the authority he might possess. This is not a doctrinal conversation. It is a discussion of who rules and how.

We live at a time where the concept of authority itself constantly comes under scrutiny. After a global pandemic, the actions of governments, public health officials, and countless other agencies will be analyzed and criticized. Scandals have plagued politicians, business leaders, clergy, and celebrities since Watergate. Mass media and the internet have democratized expertise to the point that many doubt basic science. Conspiracy theories abound. Poll after poll shows the trust in many once respected professions has eroded. The church itself has suffered from this as more and more people turn from organized religion. Authority among us is increasingly fragmented, diffused, and distrusted. The church's "kingdom" is increasingly up for grabs by the loudest and most fanatical voices.

Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem) The Idolatry of Certainty

When settled authorities erode, people don't shed them as if

they had “come of age” as Bonhoeffer described the modern age in his Letters and Papers from Prison. They recreate them. Many of our neighbors and we ourselves are like Nicodemus rushing to the tents in the middle of the night that promise us the comforts of vindication and connection. Conspiracy theories, paranoid tribalism, unfounded nostalgia, and stringent cultural militarism are all symptoms of people looking for signs that “come from God” to which they can attach their hearts and longings. Those voices from cable news and other outlets will touch more hearts in an hour than an army of preachers will in a career. They will tell stories about our serpentine enemies who are leading us out of the garden and into Sheol that must be resisted at any cost. More than once I have been told that there is some movie on YouTube that will reveal the secret mystery of who is “behind” something and pulling the strings. Such things tempt us and offer keys to understanding and changing the world in which we live. Our response to living in a complicated world often takes the form of faith in simple explanations.

When certainty is no longer given to us from on high, we tend to fabricate it with the materials we have at hand. We constantly look for signs to show us that something “comes from God.” Or better yet, we assume that these little constructions of our confused and anxious hearts – lifestyle choices, political ideology, and exposed conspiracies – are themselves gods deserving our fear, love, and trust. Idolatry marches in and occupies the void that retreating authority leaves behind.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): A Performative Rebirth?

Nicodemus reveals the root of our urge for certainty in his response to Jesus. When Jesus reveals to him that “no one is able to see the kingdom of God without being born from above” Nicodemus immediately questions how one might perform the action of crawling back into a mother’s womb. Much has been made of

the confusion of Nicodemus in either misreading a Greek suffix or confusing a figurative phrase for a literal one. But little attention is paid to the motivation behind what Nicodemus is asking. While Nicodemus does speak in a tone of bafflement about the prospect of climbing back into the womb, there's a reason why he gets stuck. It's almost as if he's saying, "What is the kingdom and how do I qualify for it?" "What do I need to do to get in?" Nicodemus seeks a law from a figure he mistakes for a new Moses and a superior law-giver. This is beyond just a semantic mistake. For Nicodemus, the new birth of the kingdom is a matter of his own performance. So too with our yearnings after new authorities. They are just flights to the law and attempts to use the law to perform our own rebirth. (After all what do we mean when we say that we are "woke"?)

If a preacher should be taking the bold step of preaching on the festival theme of the Holy Trinity it's worth noting that many preachers and theologians fall into the trap of Nicodemus. We think that our task is to make people understand the Trinity and force them to puzzle like Nicodemus over logical impossibilities. Or we might get a tad fancier and follow many current fads that imagine a "kenotic" or self-emptying in the Trinity that we are able to imitate. Both approaches repeat the mistake of Nicodemus by reducing what has been revealed to us about God in three persons to the law. Your best metaphor won't explain the Trinity to your hearers. Neither will their most loving and self-sacrificial actions allow them to "participate" in its mission. We don't understand the Trinity. We quite literally stand under it.

PROGNOSIS: It's Out of Our Hands



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Medium is the Messenger

Few activities in our lifetimes will be as passive as our own births. We don't even remember them. We are born because of the "labor" of another on our behalf. So too is our new birth in Christ. Jesus proclaims that this birth will be out of "water and Spirit." He goes on to share that comprehending where this Spirit comes and goes is beyond our ability. Our new birth is beyond our knowledge and our imitation. Attaining the kingdom is not a matter for the law. The ones born of water and Spirit will not know how they got there any more than we remember the color of the walls in the delivery room when we took our first breath.

Jesus continues in his explanation of the kingdom in a unique way. Nicodemus comes inquiring about Christ's person. "You are a teacher who has come from God." But Jesus speaks very little about his own person in this exchange. What Jesus drives at is his own work. While Nicodemus seems to be seeking a new Moses Jesus drives Nicodemus to attend to what is in Moses' hands.

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, the Son of Man must be lifted up.” As the original story in Numbers tells it “the person would look at the serpent of bronze and live” (Numbers 21:9) The kingdom is not about personality or the display of power but life and healing. It’s less about knowing than about seeing and living. It’s not about our performance but about the life we get after the final curtain. Our new birth is not a method or a performance. Like our first birth, it is utter gift at the hands of the One who is lifted up on our behalf. (So too the Trinity only reveals salvation through the will of the Father, by the death and resurrection of the Son, and through the means given by the Holy Spirit.)

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): From Who to How

Once we have heard the gospel, we don’t need to chase the law for salvation anymore. We don’t need to look for figures to invest our hopes and confidence in. We don’t need to cling to ideologies that falsely promise to us success and justification because we have these things already. The world around us becomes less a vacuum in which we confront our frustrations and anxieties, and more a place to continually receive the gifts that Christ gives whenever we hear about them and trust in them.

Forgiveness frees us from the detritus of our pasts, the fully-revealed love of Christ releases us from our fears about the present, and the gift of eternal life removes any doubts about our destination. In Melanchthon’s famous words we know Christ because we know his benefits. We sit at Jesus’ feet and learn from him as he moves Nicodemus from who Christ is to how Christ is revealed to the world.

I experienced this early on in my work as a hospice chaplain.

In one of our in-patient units, I encountered a room with Bible verses scribbled in pen on papers taped to the doors. One was John 3:16 written in big capital letters. Under these papers was another one that read, “Unless you believe these things you may not come into this room.” With a little confidence and more trepidation, I entered the room. The patient was unable to

speaking, and his wife sat over him lovingly wiping his forehead. We spoke a little and she asked me to pray. About an hour later a nurse stated that the daughter of the same patient needed to speak with me. As it turned out the patient was originally Jewish and the wife currently caring for him was a second wife and stepmother to this daughter. The daughter was Jewish. The signs barring entrance were meant to keep the daughter out. After conversing with the patient's daughter about her difficult relationship with her dying father's wife, I was inspired to use my credentials as a Christian clergy person to urge the patient's wife to allow all three of us to pray for him. The wife consented and the three of us prayed for the patient to have peace, comfort, and a loving family around him as he made his final journey. Afterward, the wife agreed to let the daughter stay in the room. At first, the fact that I had not mentioned Jesus in the prayer bothered me a little. Hadn't I missed a chance to show that wife the kinds of things that Jesus was really about? After all, she had taped that Bible verse about Jesus to the door to create a barrier. But then it dawned on me: I hadn't mentioned Jesus because I didn't need to. Christ was already at work, healing divisions (at least for those hours) and surrounding this patient with compassion. Christ was love and freedom breaking down the walls of broken relationships and weaponized words. Through the gifts requested in the prayer, we all sought Jesus in how his gifts work. I didn't have to mention Jesus because he was already there.

Step 6: The Hands of a Healer

The gospel does not rest with us. The gospel always goes out into the world. This is the point of John 3:16. Jesus is not just another sign to be worshipped and obeyed. The Father sends Jesus out to awaken faith and save the entire world. And the kingdom is not just the culmination of this work. The kingdom is the power of that work itself in each life it touches. And that contact with the gospel brings faith. The crisis of authority explained in the external problem is what every societal crisis is – a crisis of faith. We do not know what to trust. We trust

in the wrong things. Then we set out to find more wrong things to trust. This is not a pattern unique to our age. The external solution is now what it has always been. We proclaim Jesus as good news, as life already at work for us. Christ is a tree known most fully in his fruits.

Toward the end of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy, while Aragorn makes his way into the besieged citadel of Minas Tirith, an "old wife" by the name of Ioreth tends to the ailing Faramir. In her grief she states, "Would that there were kings in Gondor, as there were once upon a time, they say! For it is said in old lore: The hands of the king are the hands of a healer. And so the rightful king could ever be known." There are plenty of kings out there. Only one of them heals.