

Sermon on John 3:1-17, Romans 8:12-17  
Holy Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2009  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

This past Friday I went up to my family's cabin on a lake near Anoka in order to rake some leaves and mow the grass. It's something I do every spring with my family, usually on Memorial Day weekend, to get things ready for my parents and extended family and friends to relax and play by the lake. It's a lot of work, but it's necessary. I wanted to get it all done before the rain and cold came in on Saturday. But once I got there, I discovered that it was far too windy to rake. A brisk, northwest wind was blowing off the lake, and scattered every leaf that I had raked! It was impossible to form a pile of leaves, so I gave up, and just mowed the grass. For who can control the wind? Often we are at the wind's mercy (which any sailor can tell you). We can use the wind to sail our boats, but we cannot stop it, or control from whence it comes or where it goes.

Today in our gospel lesson a Pharisee named Nicodemus came to Jesus at night with questions about Jesus' teachings, which he did not understand. In their conversation, Nicodemus became confused when Jesus said "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," (which we interpret to mean, being born of God, or baptized, with the power of the Holy Spirit). So he asked Jesus, did one have to go back into one's mother to be born again? This seemed absurd! And it is, if you take it literally. But Jesus was talking about being born of God, through water and the Spirit, which is not by a mother, but in baptism. So being born from above has to do with the new life we receive as a gift of the Holy Spirit, which is given to us even when we don't understand it. Jesus said, "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." Still, Nicodemus did not understand. "How can these things be?"

I can relate to this question.... can you? There are a lot of things in this world that I do not understand, and maybe never will! Like mathematics equations – which I'll leave to our students and graduates! Like those questions children ask, such as: "Who made God?" "How did God create the world (and how long did it take?" "How can Jesus' body and blood really be in the bread and wine of holy communion?" Or today's question, "How can one God be in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?" "How can we have one God, with three names?"

It seems that we in the church spend an awful lot of time debating things that we can never truly understand, such as the doctrine of the Trinity – things that we best take on faith, because they are beyond our comprehension. We put these incomprehensible mysteries into packages or doctrines to try and make them

palatable, but it's really like trying to "capture the wind!" You can say our one God can be called by three names: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but that doesn't capture the wholeness of the mystery of God. We can even try to explain the trinity by showing children a three-leafed clover (often called a shamrock), or say that it's like water, which is an element that has three forms: liquid, solid ice, or steam. But this is simplifying the nature of God with a common image, but doesn't do justice to the depth of its mystery! A mystery we will never fully solve!

So I can preach all day, you and I can study scripture and the writings of theologians for a lifetime, and we may not ever understand the concept of who God is and how God works in all of its fullness. God will always remain, in some sense, a mystery to us because God is beyond our comprehension. As Jesus said, the Spirit of God is like the wind, which blows where it will. We may hear its sound or feel its force, but we don't know where it is coming from or where it is going.

What we do know of God is what you and I and other human beings experience, and share with one another. We understand what we see of God's work in the world: the beauty of God's creation, the power of the wind and the waves of the oceans, and all the creatures who live upon the earth. But we don't know how and why all of this came to be: we are but witnesses.

So it is with Jesus. We don't know exactly how Jesus came to be – we know Jesus was born a human being named Mary, but scripture says Jesus is so much more: he is the son of God. We know Jesus was a great teacher, who died on a cross, and was raised by God from the dead – but we don't know how! Still, we do know that God sent Jesus not to condemn the world, but so that the whole world might be saved through him. We don't know how, but we have heard! In fact, Jesus has promised that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life! We don't know how that happens either, but we believe! Or we are invited to believe!

So how much of this do we really need to understand? The more the better, I always say! But all we really need to know is that God loves us all, that God loves you, me, and all people of this world. As Paul says in the lesson from Romans, "we are children of God, and if children, then heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.." How do we know this? It is a gift of the Spirit. "And all those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."

So we are led by the Spirit...who is like the wind, coming from places we do not know, and leading us to places and a life that we could never imagine. So it is futile for us as human beings to capture the Spirit and put God in a box or a package (by thinking that we can explain all of who God is or what God is doing). But many Christians think that they know who God is, how God thinks, who God loves and what God does! And too many of us think we speak for God, especially when we judge or condemn others in God's name! How audacious a claim this is!

But Jesus reminds us today that God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. So when we condemn others, we are doing so contrary to the will of God! Far better for us to love others, just as God so loved the world that God sent the Son to save it.

So how can we come to this understanding? How do we come to be led by the Spirit, and live as children of God? Martin Luther gives us a hint, in his explanation to the third article of the Apostle's Creed, the work of the Spirit:

*I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church day after day he fully forgives my sins and the sins of all believers. On the last day he will raise me and all the dead and give me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.*

The Spirit of God continues to blow among us in the Church today, calling and leading us to places and faith which we cannot imagine ourselves. So I invite you to be open to the Spirit, to the wind of God which blows where God chooses, creating life, building faith, giving the gifts of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. We ask for this Spirit in the blessing given in Holy Baptism, and repeat it in our Affirmation of Baptism (as we did last week for Confirmation), in the laying on of hands.

So on this Feast of the Holy Trinity, I do not seek to explain the doctrine of the Trinity so that you might understand it. For understanding God is a gift of the Spirit, not merely of human teaching. Instead, I invite you to open your eyes and your heart, to watch for the examples of God working in your life and in the world. See the imprint of God in the beauty of creation, in the rain that nourishes the earth, in the faith of human beings, and in the love that you and I can have for one another and for the world when we love as God has loved us. This summer as you and I go outside, let's look for the creative work of God who gives this world beauty, and gives you and me and all creatures life. Let's look for the face of Jesus in the faces of all the children of God whom Jesus loves (both young and old, from all nations and faiths), and for his love as it is shared by Christians in his name. Let's look for the imprint of the Spirit in the faith of all those who seek the God and in the wisdom and insight that they share when they find it. Let's open ourselves to the wind of God, and let it blow upon us and the Church, so that we all can experience the fresh breeze of faith, and the newness of life that it brings! May God blow on us with the winds of hope and renewal that Jesus has promised, and help us to believe, so that we may inherit eternal life. Thanks be to God! Amen.