

Festival of the Holy Trinity | St. John 3:1-15
June 11, 2017 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty and everlasting God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we give You most hearty thanks that You have granted unto us a clear and abundant revelation of Your being and purpose; and we humbly ask You, give us grace to acknowledge, honor and praise You as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, who lives and reigns, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 134)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the third chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." / Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." / Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" / Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, 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 the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, We speak of what We know, and bear witness to what We have seen, but you do not receive Our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, whose thoughts are not our thoughts, which is why we have righteousness and salvation in Him, dear fellow redeemed:

One of the greatest gifts God has given to humans is the ability to reason. This is among the First Article blessings of God the Father: "I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them" (Luther's *Small Catechism*). He gave us this ability so that we would be equipped to manage His creation, to build homes and communities for ourselves, and to collaborate with our neighbors.

But the primary purpose for our reason is that we should acknowledge and give glory to God. Paul told the people of Athens that the true God wants all nations to “seek [Him], in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him” (Ac. 17:27). Sinners cannot reach God and establish communion with Him on their own, but they can certainly know He exists. Even those who have never heard His Word should know this. Paul explained in his Epistle to the Romans, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (1:19-20). He goes on to talk about how the existence of conscience, the inner sense of right and wrong, should further convince people that there is a God (2:14-16). And if there is a God, they should obviously want to serve Him.

I

But as it is with any of the gifts God gives, sinners do not use their reason the way it is intended. It is popular today to claim that faith and reason are totally opposite each other. The idea is that those who claim to have faith are no longer using reason. And those who utilize reason do not need faith. This is especially applied in the field of science. Science is thought to be the ground of reason, where no room is made for faith. Never mind that many of the great scientists of the last 2,000 years were Christians. Never mind that science, properly speaking, is nothing else than the study of God’s creation. Modern, atheistic science does not welcome those who contend that there is (or even that there *may be*) a higher power at work in the universe.

This leaves us wishing that the scientists who praise reason so highly, would actually use it. It is often said that atheists reject God because they are using their reason only. But denying that there is a God is actually unreasonable, as the evidence around us and inside of us shows. The psalmist declares, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps. 14:1). Such unbelievers remain under the wrath of God. Paul writes that “they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.... And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:20-21, 28-29).

So there are proper and improper uses for our ability to think and reason. When this ability is utilized for sinful plans and pursuits, then good and holy thinking will become more and more clouded. Before you realize it, you may even lose sight of any standard of right and wrong. You might picture it this way: The Christian life is like holding a map with a clear path to your destination. You know where you are heading and where you belong. But as you go on your way, you get sidetracked. You hear the sounds of people having a good time to the right and to the left. You see bright lights beckoning you in a different direction. Maybe you can still reach your destination by taking a little detour. You turn into a dark alleyway and then another. You find the alternate path is not as clear as it seemed. Before long, you are lost. And you are vulnerable.

Your mind is capable of traveling an infinite number of paths. If you let it walk down the path of hatred, it will be satisfied with nothing less than revenge. If your mind is full of greed, there will be no room for spiritual riches. Whatever sinful thoughts you fail to keep in check, those thoughts will consume you. And inevitably, sinful thoughts unchecked lead to sinful actions,

then sinful habits, and then sinful addictions. And then it becomes very difficult for the brain to think the thoughts of God.

In today's sermon text, Jesus was approached by a ruler of the Jews named Nicodemus, whom Jesus referred to as a "teacher." Nicodemus had an honored position among the Jews and did not want to jeopardize it. This is why he *"came to Jesus by night."* He was undoubtedly a gifted man, but for all his intellectual abilities, he had a hard time understanding Jesus' words. Jesus told him that every person born in the natural way needs to be born again. *"Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"* Nicodemus asked incredulously. Nicodemus did not understand, and I do not think we would have fared any better.

II

What Jesus was telling this *"teacher of Israel"* is that human reason has its place, but that salvation is accomplished not by man's will but by God's will. The Holy Spirit brings about spiritual rebirth and renews the mind, so that it is filled with godly wisdom. The Holy Spirit begins with God's law, to show each sinner how far off his thoughts are from God. Jesus summarized the first part of God's law in this way, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind"* (Mt. 22:37).

Jesus says that keeping God's law means loving Him, among other things, with all your mind. Your mind should serve no other God but Him. Your mind should communicate in words that are for His glory alone. Your mind should be filled with His Word and thereby attuned to His will. Loving God with all your mind means acknowledging your weaknesses and recognizing your limits. You know how often you have thought and acted in ways that were self-serving, instead of thinking about how to serve God and your neighbors. You have also questioned God and ignored His Word because you thought you knew what was better for you than He did.

Many people follow only the parts of the Bible that agree with their own thinking. But the Christian who has heard God's law knows it is the other way around. It is not the Bible that has problems, but my own reason. It is tainted by sin. It does not guide me in the way I should go. Only God can do that, and He does. God the Father sent His Son to be *"born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law"* (Gal. 4:4-5). God the Son perfectly followed His Father's will with all His heart and with all His soul and with all His mind, and perfectly loved His neighbor as Himself. He kept the law for you, in your place, so that you would be judged holy in God's sight. He also made satisfaction for your sins by being lifted up like the bronze serpent to save you from the poison of sin.

These blessings come to you by the work of the third Person of the Holy Trinity, God the Holy Spirit. As Jesus said, *"unless one is born of water and the Spirit—a reference to baptism—, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."* The Holy Spirit works unseen through the Word and Sacraments to change minds and convert those who formerly pursued foolish things, including you and me. He reveals even to the most stubborn minds what they did not know they were missing. They could never have imagined *"what God has prepared for those who love him"* (1Cor. 2:9). Without the work of the Holy Spirit, the salvation willed by God the Father and won by God the Son could not be distributed. But it is distributed, even throughout the entire world.

How any of this can be, is a mystery to human reason. We cannot understand how God can be one and three. We do not know how the God who created, can make Himself a creature, or how the God who is Life can die. We do not comprehend how the God who was sinned against can so deeply love the sinners. We cannot imagine why God wants the likes of us to be with Him forever in glory. But even though our brains cannot comprehend these things, they are nevertheless true. They are true because God says so, and you and I are in no position to challenge Him. Paul says as much in today's Epistle lesson, "*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to Him that he might be repaid?' For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen*" (Rom. 11:33-36).

The truly great minds recognize that our human knowledge and ability are nothing compared with the thoughts of God. The great minds bow in humble awe at what God planned for sinners even before the foundation of the world. The **Great Minds Honor God** for His never-ending grace and mercy.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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