

Sunday, May 27, 2018
Trinity Sunday

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

Yanni or Laurel?¹

SCRIPTURE READING – John 15:9-17

INTRODUCTION:

Christian theology is continually growing deeper and wider over centuries. Throughout thousands of years, believers, pastors, theologians and scholars, persistently refine, rethink and reinterpret when discovering new information and bring prayerful contemplation to emerging scientific insight. This all serves to expand the church's richer understanding of God's essence, being and nature. Over time and thoughtful conversation, greater meaning and concepts are derived.

Although written centuries apart, various texts serve to further illuminate our understanding of God in new ways. Even the authors may have had no idea of how their theological thread would contribute to the grand tapestry that is our faith seeking understanding.

The ancient doctrine of the Trinity is a great example. Trinitarian thought arose out of the early Christians reflecting on their Hebrew Scriptures and their own personal experience with Jesus of Nazareth. The God of Abraham came into new focus through the risen Christ. Also, these early disciples encountered a powerful mystical presence with what Jesus called the Holy Spirit. Over time, Christians wrestled out concepts and language to express this Trinitarian mystery.

In today's scripture, an esteemed and learned Jewish teacher listens carefully to Jesus, who insists that a change in perspective is needed to gain a deeper way of seeing and understanding God as three and one.

Hear this reading from the Gospel of John Chapter 3 verses 1 through 17.

¹ Listen to the experiment on line... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KM380FDKU20>

SCRIPTURE:

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked.
“Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.
“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus,
“and do you not understand these things?
Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”*

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

The Word of God teaching us to be a people of God...

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\* 3:14 The Son of man must be lifted up. In contrast to other important figures who *ascended* to God (Enoch and Elijah), the Son of Man *descended* from heaven (see v. 13). And as Moses’ snake gave life to those who looked upon it, so the Son of Man will give the eternal life of God to those who look (believe) upon him (see Nu 21:4-9).

I've always really liked this guy Nicodemus. He is one of the only people in the Gospels who is scholarly, religiously well educated and held in high esteem among his peers, but still yearns to hear more, to learn more, to grow in wisdom. Nicodemus is totally open to the deeper truths that Jesus teaches. All of the other Pharisees that Jesus contends with in the Gospels challenge his teachings and condemn his practices. They try to undermine him and accuse him of being a drunkard and a heretic. But this Pharisee, Nicodemus seems like he is truly seeking to know more about God. He is convinced that Jesus "came from God" and this curiosity and yearning compels him to seek Jesus out for a one to one conversation. Nicodemus knows how hated Jesus is among his peers, so he comes quietly at night. From the shadowed darkness he is hoping that Jesus might illuminate his understanding of God. Unlike many religious leaders, Nicodemus is not locked in a prison of rigid legalism or bound by a false sense of certainty. He is not threatened by the possibility changing the way he understands God.

Nicodemus is an authentic questioning believer. I imagine that's why Jesus is able to speak to him using such abstract symbolism. The metaphorical illustration Jesus uses with Nicodemus is densely packed with theological meaning and insight. Jesus reveals to Nicodemus the astounding, game-changing gift that God has brought to the world - God-in-flesh-appearing. "For God so loves the world."

Let us pray...

*Abba, Father, Mother, Creator—we call You by many names. Jesus, Christ, Spirit, Beloved Presence, this morning we desire to draw closer to You by any name. We desire to hear Your voice above the chatter of the world, to know Your ways and to walk in them. So now, Most High God, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Who can tell me chapter and verse? That's it, John 3:16, arguably the most famous Biblical citation around these days. You've seen it on bold on tee shirts at sporting events and noticed it spray-painted on the subway walls. Have you ever wondered why this verse is the one that became so famous? What is so important that it would gain such familiarity? Well for one, Martin Luther called John 3:16 "the entire gospel in miniature." Today he might have said that John 3:16 is the ultimate Christian elevator speech. I agree with that. It is a powerful sentence, and to truly understand it, we must view it in the wider context of the Gospel or risk building a false theology on one sentence. Context is the antidote to the poison of certainty.

The danger of certainty is that it causes us to close off to possibility. We get stuck in our own distinctive point of view and feel the need to justify and defend our position. All of us are predisposed to view our existence from an orbit that spins around the center-point of self. We are shaped by our own history; our own lived out experience and our own distinctive observations of life. Our values and moral perspective have roots in our own family history, the specific experiences we have had along the way, and an assortment of principles and ethics we have been taught since birth.

Over time we imperceptibly create layers and layers of unquestioned filters. Assumptions become facts and alternative possibilities are unthinkable. These filters govern how we perceive reality and our place in the world. Without really even knowing it, we become so firm in our point of view that we are blinded and deaf to any other way of being. We harden into strong, dualistic thinking that orders our fixed world. *It's us against them – the republican conservative or liberal democrat– I know I'm right so you must be so wrong.* It seems like to be a validated as a human being we are required to pick a side, stick with it and defend it at all cost.

Sometimes however, new information rattles our certainty and demands that we reevaluate. What I thought was clearly a universal truth for everyone turns out to be only my point of view. In a broader context we begin to see that another's perception can also be valid – and not diminish or discredit our own experience. Last week for instance I stumbled upon a fiercely divisive argument that was raging all over the Internet. Have any of you been caught up in the [“Yanni/Laurel controversy?”](#)<sup>2</sup> It is a simple recording of a man reading the word, “Laurel” but oddly enough, almost half of the people who listen to the recording insist that they hear the word “Yanni”. Let's try it. ([play clip](#)) Show of hands, how many of you hear “Laurel”...How many hear “Yanni”. Is there a consensus of who is right and who is wrong? No! It all depends on what you can hear. Neither is completely right or totally wrong! In fact we learn that we are all correct!

When Jesus talks with the questioning believer Nicodemus, I think this is what he is getting at. He says that to understand the ways of God “You must be born again.” You must approach Spiritual matters with the openness and freshness of an infant, as if you are just now being born and completely open to all possibilities. You must trust that you can **not** and never **will** see or hear the fullness or completeness of God, so learn to sit comfortably in this mystery and paradox, claim your reality but not at the expense of another and hold it all lightly.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/05/16/upshot/audio-clip-yanny-laurel-debate.html>

John 3:16 is a pivotal and critically important text that clearly reveals who Jesus was and why he came. It is “the Gospel in miniature”, but all too frequently this one verse is weaponized into a scriptural club that is wielded about to defend a religious exclusivity, and inspire aggressive contempt against all outsiders who don’t carry the same orthodoxy of Christian exceptionality. “We all hear Yanni! So say we all!”

But the wider context here reveals Jesus talking about a God whose primary concern is not a religious cage but rather a wide-open and extravagant love for all of humanity. “For God so loved the world.” And then verse 17 is even more explicit. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

Nicodemus comes to believe that Jesus was in fact the Son of God and he acts out his faith when he bravely negotiates a tomb for Jesus after his execution. Jesus gave him the wider context that freed him to see the vastness of God’s love and mercy for all people.

Everyday we are invited to be born anew, allowing paradox; absolutism and relativity to all exist as 3 notes of the same chord. To be born again is to clearly hear Yanni yet allow for Laurel to have her place as well. And very truly I tell you; no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

Amen.