

May 27, 2018: Trinity Sunday (Year B)
John 3:1-17: Would You Care to Dance?

The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church describes the Doctrine of the Trinity as the “central dogma (or belief) of the Christian Church.” If anyone who has attended a church for any length of time where I served as pastor cannot define the Doctrine of the Trinity, I would consider, considering myself, a failure. I cannot be responsible for everyone. By define I simply mean that every Christian ought to know the Doctrine of the Trinity is the belief that the One God exists in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

As far as explaining it, that is a different story. If any of you can do that, you need to be up here, not me. I don't fully understand it. As important as I believe the Doctrine of the Trinity is, I don't particularly enjoy trying to preach on it, much less explain it. But if I didn't try it would suggest that I think it doesn't matter. And I think it does. I think it matters a lot. So together, we are going to struggle through it.

The text we are going to focus on this morning is the familiar story of Nicodemus...

Read John 3:1-17

You know the school year is coming to an end, and summer is about to begin, when you see the signs of prom all around you. Before the age of social media, the tip off was seeing more limos than usual cruising around town, and high school age kids dressed up way more than they normally would be. That still happens, but now we also see proud parents plastering prom photos of their children all over Facebook.

I have mixed feelings about prom. No, I take that back, I'm not a fan. Not for any religious reason. I don't think it's morally wrong to go to prom. It's because of what prom was like for me. It was too much money, and not much fun. My least favorite part was the dancing. Not because I'm not good at it, which I'm not (unless no one is watching), but because of the year the person I went with danced with someone other than me, for a good forty-five minutes. I don't need your pity. Every bad experience eventually makes its way into a sermon and is therefore redeemed. Plus, just a few days ago this individual posted pictures of her son, all dressed up and ready to go to his prom. So I made the following comment, “I hope he doesn't take after his mother and forget who his date is.” Of course I'm kidding.

Speaking of dancing, some people say life is like a dance. It has its share of slow songs, where time seems to stand still. It has its share of fast songs too, where time is almost a blur. Some dance through life solo. Some dance through life with a partner. Some experience both. Some stand over by the punch bowl, or over near the wall, afraid to step out on to the dance floor. Some enjoy the dance immensely. Some find the dance extremely miserable. But for every single person, the dance of life eventually comes to an end.

Some of the earliest theologians of the Church compared the life of God to a dance, in a manner of speaking. In their attempts to understand and communicate the Doctrine of the Trinity they used the word *perichoresis*, which is a Greek word that can mean “rotation,” or simply “dancing around.” It was used to refer to the circle dance that was often part of a Greek play.

They chose this term because this image of people holding hands, and dancing around in a circle, helped them envision the relationship they believed existed within the Triune God. The three persons are distinct, yet inseparable. They are joined together as one complete whole, acting, or we might say, dancing together, to accomplish their goal, which is the salvation of the world.

The dance of God's life is different from the dance of our life in a number of ways, but the most notable is that God's dance never ends. If you want to be technical, neither does it have a beginning. God's dance always has been, always is, and always will be...for all eternity. Our dance, on the other hand, will come to an end. What this leaves us with then is two dances. An earthly dance going on down here, that we are all participating in, and that will end, and a heavenly dance going on up there, that will last forever.

So what does any of this have to do with Nicodemus? I'm glad you asked.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is more easily understood through what God does than what God is. In other words, we understand actions better than ideas. And if we look at this story of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus through the lens of the Trinity, we can see how our Triune God has acted to bring about our salvation.

Nicodemus came to Jesus and expressed his belief, which was shared by many of his fellow Pharisees; that Jesus was a teacher sent from God. They had come to this conclusion because of all the signs he was doing; turning water into wine, healing diseases, casting out demons, etc. Most of the general population of the Jews felt the very same way.

The implication of this belief is that these "signs" were the reason God sent Jesus, when, in reality, these signs were intended to be just that, signs that pointed to an even greater reality of what Jesus was going to accomplish with his life. They were intended to inspire faith in him, but not as a great teacher, but the Savior. But the people, and the Pharisees, couldn't see beyond the signs to this greater reality.

To stay with our metaphor of a dance, this is how we might paraphrase what Nicodemus was saying to Jesus, "Jesus, you've got some nice moves, and we want to dance through life with you." We can understand such a request. For the Jews, the dance of life, so far, had not gone so well. Worse than my Junior Prom even, which is hard to imagine. They were prisoners in their own land, living under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. They saw Jesus doing all these incredible things and they started thinking, "Hey, Jesus could turn our dance into a party. He could make this life worth living."

There were two serious problems with that way of thinking. First, no matter how wonderful Jesus made the earthly dance, it would still come to an end because of the reality of sin. Second, improving the earthly dance fell short of what Jesus came to do. He came to invite them to the heavenly dance. But they couldn't gain admission unless they were born from above, or born again.

Nicodemus could only interpret what Jesus said literally, so of course it made no sense to him. It was not possible for a person to reenter his mother's womb. But Jesus was not referring to a physical birth, but a spiritual birth, which is only possible through the Spirit of God. Jesus tried to explain it to him again.

God loved the world so much that He sent His Son, who through the power of the Holy Spirit, became flesh. In this way, Jesus entered into the earthly dance. He experienced everything there was to

experience, including the part where the dance ended. Through his death, we can receive forgiveness for our sins.

Then God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit, raised Jesus from the dead, and exalted him, and he returned to his rightful place at the right hand of the Father. Then the Father and Son sent the Holy Spirit, to be poured out upon all flesh. So that our spirit, can become one with the Spirit of God, and we can join in the heavenly dance.

This is how our Triune God acted to bring about our salvation. This is, in the words of the great German Reformer Martin Luther, the Gospel in a nutshell. It is still hard to understand. There is a reason why the Scriptures refer to it as a mystery. But understanding it is not what matters. It's whether or not a person believes it and accepts it that counts.

One way we could sum up what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus is this: The Kingdom of God is an eternal kingdom. To be a part of this kingdom, you must join the heavenly dance. I'm extending an invitation, but you have to accept it. You must see me as more than a teacher. You must come to know me as Savior and Lord. So what will it be Nicodemus? Do you care to dance?

How did Nicodemus respond? We don't hear from him again in this passage. In John chapter 7 he reappears. The chief priests and some of the Pharisees were discussing whether or not to arrest Jesus, and Nicodemus spoke up on Jesus' behalf. He appears again in John chapter 19, where he assisted Joseph of Arimathea with the task of preparing Jesus' body for burial. Though we don't know for certain, these two actions seem to suggest Nicodemus did eventually accept the invitation.

Jesus extends the same invitation to us this morning. "Do you care to dance?" If we want to see the Kingdom of God, and inherit the gift of eternal life, we must say yes. The only way we mortal human beings can live forever is if our spirit becomes one with the eternal Spirit of God.

If you have accepted the invitation, there is something you need to understand. In verse 16, where it says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life." The verb "have" is in the present tense, which means our participation in the heavenly dance is a present reality.

From the moment we accept Jesus' invitation we begin the dance that will last for all eternity. We are still participating in the earthly dance...moving to the beat of the earthly music, but we hear another beat as well. It's faint at first, but the deeper we go in our relationship with God, the longer we walk with him, the louder it becomes, and the more obvious it is to those dancing around us, that we are hearing music that they are not.

They are scared, and sad, and disappointed, because they live in constant fear that the current song could be their last. They anticipate that at any moment the music could stop...at least for them anyway...the lights could turn off, and their dance will be done.

But they can tell that we are not scared, sad or disappointed. We're full of joy. We act like people who think the party is just getting started. They want what we have. If we're paying attention we will recognize this, and invite them to join us in the heavenly dance.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is the central belief of our faith because it describes how the One God acted through three persons to offer us the gift of salvation. Without it, we would be completely, and

hopelessly, and eternally lost. But God has asked us to dance. We praise him, and worship him, and give him thanks for his gracious invitation.