

Augustana Heritage Association Festival Worship Service

Christ Chapel

Gustavus Adolphus College

St. Peter, Minnesota

June 23, 2012

John 3:1-17

I have always thought of Nicodemus as an interesting figure. Intellectually clearly upper-class, a man of power and might. Yet he uses the protection of a dark night to seek out Jesus who clearly is not upper class and does not hold a senior position of any kind in established society. Even more remarkably, he opens the conversation on a rather flattering note. “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God ...” Does he really know and believe that? Or is he just testing? Maybe the language of excellence he uses is just a disguise for his own uncertainty and doubt: Jesus just doesn’t fit the ordinary categories.

Whatever it is, Jesus ignores the sweet-talk and responds provokingly: “No one can see the reign of God without being born from above.” Hearing this, Nicodemus drops the arrogance that is part of his public role and says the obvious: You can’t be born again as a grown-up. You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb to be re-born.

Evidently, this is not a biology lesson. The gospel never exhausts itself in biology. Not that biology does not matter, but there is more to the dynamics of life than that which fits within the scope of biological understanding. The gospels portray Jesus as very sensitive to biological needs—to an extent that his opponents find him too fond of eating and drinking, for example. And yet, it is more than biology. Jesus insists on showing that eating and drinking in communion can become a symbol of the communion that is a mark of the kingdom of God. The reign of God announces its reality in, through, and under natural processes—as we believe that Christ is present in, through and under the bread and wine in the Eucharist. God is creating and acting in, through, and under natural processes.

So, no, Nicodemus is not in biology class—nevertheless, he is exposed to an exercise in problem-based learning.

Very truly, no entry into the reign of God without being born of water and Spirit! That’s the problem Jesus puts before Nicodemus, who after all is not a student but one of the most senior teachers in the country. “You are a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” Jesus is teasing. If Nicodemus was a really good teacher, he would not have felt offended, because good teachers are deeply aware of the limitations of human knowledge! However, Jesus is not talking philosophy or advanced academic knowledge. He uses rather basic knowledge about the physical world to teach about spiritual things. Either this is fine pedagogy or a rather spooky meshing of categories—the thing people do when they refer to quantum physics in a strange attempt to show that stones have consciousness, or something weird like that.

Nicodemus must have been puzzled. Maybe he had quandaries similar to those of a critical thinker pondering over a postmodern text: Is this a serious step forward or just dressed-up nebulous thinking? Is Jesus conveying a deep truth, or is this more like a hoax? Does this deserve serious respect, acceptance, and changes to my view of the world and my way of life?

We, who have the privilege of a wider perspective and the wisdom of generations that have gone before us, are more fortunate than Nicodemus. Quite easily, we can see that the solution to the problem Jesus has put before him is baptism. Baptism in the name of the Triune God is the entry by water and Spirit into the reign of God! Baptism is about owning citizenship in the realm of God.

Recently Sweden celebrated its National Holiday (June 6, to be precise). I hold dual citizenship myself, and this year was only the fourth time I experienced the Swedish National Holiday as a Swede, although I have spent most of my adult life in Sweden. By the time I was elected and consecrated as a bishop in the Church of Sweden, I was not a Swedish citizen—a fact that had never been addressed throughout the election process. One day, in the very early days of my episcopate, a journalist inquired about my background and asked in passing, “When did you become a Swedish citizen?” “Well I’m not.” His eyes widened with excitement and I bet that in his mind he already saw the big headline announcing that a new scandal had been revealed: Unknowingly, the Church of SWEDEN had elected a bishop who wasn’t even a Swede! The days when the Church of Sweden was a state church are not quite

forgotten yet. Before the disestablishment, Church of Sweden bishops were indeed required to be Swedish citizens. (Nowadays only the Archbishop is. I guess that is because he gets to marry and baptize royals!). It felt so good to tell the journalist: You know—the church is different; it's not the passport that counts; it's baptism!

It took the journalist a while to digest this, but he was clearly amazed by the difference the Church makes when it comes to citizenship. And I felt proud of the church that acts in accordance with its theology, at least in this regard. Citizenship in the kingdom of God takes priority over citizenship in the kingdom of Sweden.

It strikes me that when we talk about citizenship in the civil sense, we do so in relation to borders between states: without borders no nationalities and no citizenship. When Jesus talks about citizenship, associations run in the opposite direction: freedom rather than borders; crossing of borders rather than establishing and guarding borders. He underlines this with his remark about the wind and the Spirit: the mark of the Spirit is freedom in regard to borders. The wind/Spirit blows where it chooses; it brings freshness wherever it blows. The wind/Spirit cannot be locked up in fortresses that are inaccessible to those dwelling outside. And this is the way it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

People born of the Spirit, baptized into communion with the triune God, are called into a new relationship to the visible and invisible borders in this world. They are called to holy disrespect for many man-made borders. The gospel stories give us fairly good ideas of which borders in our world we should claim to cross freely or even try to dismantle. They also suggest ways of respecting borders that tend to be disrespected in ways that hurt the lives of people and creation. The gospel is about freedom—freedom to disrespect borders that harm, and freedom to respect borders that foster the development of wholesome relationships between people and God, between men, women, and children, and between people and the rest of creation.

This sounds beautifully abstract, doesn't it? Let us become a little more concrete and talk about communication and borders. This is going to be important as we journey towards 2017 when we commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. For

Luther, the new printing technology provided freedom of communication; for us, it is the internet. We have moved from Gutenberg to Google.

The internet and the blogosphere offer an occasion to revisit the issues of boundaries and freedom. It has given a new dimension to the questions of what is public, what is private, what is personal, and what is appropriate communication on each of these levels. On the one hand, the blogosphere seems to be a powerful metaphor of life in the Spirit of baptism: No passport required to communicate in cyberspace, freedom of the word, potentially a powerful instrument of creating opinion for a good cause, of sharing news about events and circumstances that the public eye avoids to see, a thorn in the flesh of oppressive systems, a democratic forum. Indeed, it is a valuable tool in crossing or even dismantling borders that are in conflict with the Spirit of the reign of God.

On the other hand, we know that the blogosphere also brings out some of the worst things in people—fostering a behavior that reminds us of teenagers in a school-yard, which means: insecurity expressed as arrogance, insatiable desire for affirmation, endless exchanges of mutual admiration within the in-group, while the out-group is subject to disinterest or bullying. Things are revealed for the whole world to see that one normally would not want to lay open before one's closest friends. Judgments are passed in a tone that one would hope nobody uses when speaking face to face to another person. Ironically, virtual communication in cyberspace allows rules of who is friend and who is foe to be cut in stone more than in the physical world. When success and quality is measured in terms of number of clicks or followers on twitter, and superficiality trumps serious searching for knowledge and wisdom, we need to worry on behalf of our human rights-based systems as well as on behalf of the spirit of baptism in the name of the Triune God. Those two belong together. To say it with the vision statement of the Lutheran World Federation: “Liberated by God's grace, we are a communion in Christ living and working together for a just, peaceful and reconciled world.”

Baptism in the name of the triune God means being baptized into a dynamic relationship that is driven by love. That is how I think about the Trinity—as being baptized into an ongoing dynamic relationship, driven by love. For God so loved the world that he gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him – that is, who trusts this story, the gospel, and lets himself or herself be

drawn into the dynamics of it—may not perish but may have eternal life. And as if Jesus had foreseen that his words would be misused as a creedal check in order to exclude people from the reign of God—if you don't adhere to doctrine you will perish—he added, “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.” It is to this wonderful, dynamic, saving relationship that we are invited to renew our commitment today. Amen.