

s-Trinity 09-Holy Mystery
John 3:1-17 *Jesus and Nicodemus*
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HOLY MYSTERY

How many times, when you were a student, or perhaps participating in a seminar or something, did the person giving the presentation say these words: “There’s no such thing as a stupid question”?

What kind of thing is that to say? Of course there are stupid questions! The one I like the best is when somebody taps on the bathroom door and says, “Are you in there?” What do you say—“No, I’m a ventriloquist”??

I guess a stupid question would be asking about something perfectly obvious. I can think of a few more. How about, “Are you going to eat that chocolate bar you’ve been saving?” “Do you really like those shoes?” “Is that bad tooth giving you any pain?” Or how about this one: “Do you want me to change the baby?” I think the answer back in my day was, “DUH!”

Questions that are NOT stupid are any questions that are motivated by genuine curiosity. Even if the answer ought to be easy; even if the answer ought to be known, it’s not stupid to ask for more information so that you can understand something.

Jesus kind of gently teases Nicodemus in this story from the gospel of John. Nic seems kind of dense, but his motives are good. He doesn’t understand Jesus, but he wants to. The questions he asks are questions that any literal-minded person might very well ask of Jesus.

We’ve got people like Nicodemus in our church; in fact, every church in every age has had people like Nicodemus—plenty of them; people who want to understand Jesus, but need more information.

Nic approaches Jesus with respect. He’s observant, and he’s thoughtful; he realizes that Jesus couldn’t do what he does without God behind every word and action. But I think Nic is one of those people who isn’t into floating off into la-la land. He lives in a very real, very concrete world. If I do “x” then “y” will happen. In Nicodemus’s world, rain falls from clouds in the sky. You’re born, you live, then you die. Birds gotta fly, fish gotta swim. God is invisible, but fairly predictable: the law is something solid and dependable, and most people he knows don’t have the time OR the inclination to sit around and wonder about “unseen things above.”

You can be sure you’d never catch Nicodemus at a séance or a Grateful Dead concert.

Speaking of concerts, when Jim and I were young sprouts we were sort of half-baked Deadheads, which means that we went to any Grateful Dead concert we could afford and get to with a reasonable amount of effort. We were fans but somehow life interfered with traipsing around in tie-dye T-shirts and long, straggly hair.

I think it was the last concert we attended, in the early 80’s. We were sitting there in UC Berkeley’s Greek Theater, trying not to inhale as the usual cloud of marijuana smoke rose into the summer air, when this wacko little hippy chick comes up and squats down next to me. She’s not too stoned to have noticed that I was about 25 months pregnant, and she thought that was pretty cool. “Oh wow,” she crooned. “Is your baby gonna be a Deadhead?”

“DUH!”

Actually, that wasn't as stupid a question as it seems. Peter turned out to be quite a rock and roller, but whether it's because he absorbed that psychedelic music right through my tummy skin or inherited it genetically from his daddy, I couldn't say. It's kind of a mystery, isn't it?

Born from above. What the heck does that mean? Nicodemus can't figure out what Jesus is getting at. How can somebody be born again? It's kind of a life-time thing. Unless you're into Eastern religions, there's no second turn on the karmic wheel.

So how are we supposed to start life all over again? How exactly does one go about being reincarnated? How do we stop being whatever we were before and start being something altogether different? Well, Jesus has an answer, but it's not an easy one—especially if you're an average guy like Nicodemus.

First of all, it's not something that happens here, in the physical world. We're talking emotional, spiritual, go-mind-see-wisdom-and-truth. We're talking about feelings and fears and desires, not making a comeback into the diaper set.

Being born again isn't rational. It's not linear. It can't be taught, it can't be learned, it can't be contained. It only can be experienced... maybe.

I kind of dislike that over-used term, "born again." Jesus didn't use it. He called it being "born anew" or "born from above," in other words, from heaven. To me, "anew" has a different connotation than "again." "Again" implies the same old thing, just one more time. What good would that do? Yuck! I wouldn't want to go through this past week again, let alone junior high school, or heaven forbid, my whole life.

But I wouldn't mind being *renewed*. That has a more positive sound, doesn't it? I could stand to be repainted, replumbed, reprogrammed, refreshed!

Did you ever go to a spa? Maybe up in Calistoga? You know, have a mud bath, a warm Jacuzzi, an hour-long Swedish massage? Maybe some hot rocks rubbed all over you, or a tiny Japanese masseuse walking on your back? Let me tell you; if you haven't, you should—at least once. I guarantee it will peel the stress right off your hide.

For a little while, at least, you'll feel renewed. But of course, that kind of renewal only lasts until we get back on the freeway. Then all those loose springs tighten back up, until we're wound up as tight as ever before. A hundred-buck's worth of massage, and all I've got to show for it is some residual mud under my fingernails.

Jesus says, in this paraphrase by Eugene Petersen, that he's talking about something that happens within. Somehow, the Holy Spirit claims us and remakes us into something that is "out of this world." We can't see the change, but it is there. We can't see the wind, but we know it's there because we can see the things its power has moved and changed.

In other words, we don't need the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing the "Hallelujah Chorus" while Michelangelo's white-bearded God flies in to poke us with his fingertip, in order to be reborn. Maybe, for some of us, it will be a *process* rather than an event. Maybe our renewal will sort of creep up on us like autumn creeps up on winter. But whether the Spirit seeps into our bones or hits us over the head with a thunderbolt, we will know that it has happened. We will know by what we experience; that something essential has changed for the better, and that somehow, mysteriously, God has been at work in us—through the Spirit of the Christ.

Now, you know—or maybe you don't know, this would be an example of a not-stupid question—that this whole concept of the Trinity is not in the Bible. Uh-uh. The church fathers,

sitting around one day with nothing else to do, decided to try to sort out just exactly who these three divine expressions of Godhood were and how they're supposed to relate to each other. They liked the ancient Christian formula from the baptism ritual: in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But do the Son and the Spirit emanate from the Father? Is one more powerful than the others? Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Well, they worked it out to their own satisfaction, but nothing says we have to buy it all. After all, Jesus himself—and I guess I tend to lean toward Jesus when it comes to all things theological—Jesus says to trust your own experience.

Still, us middle-class, mainline Protestants do tend to shy away from certain features of this thing we call Trinity. We usually are comfortable with the Father God. Maybe we call him Mother God, instead, but it's much the same. Creator? Yeah, we like that term even better. It's more generic. And Son? Sure, because that's Jesus. But maybe we don't actually like the title "Son," since we don't take the virgin birth seriously and we don't really understand the incarnation. But "teacher" or "brother," even "Savior"—well, that's all right. With that, we can cope.

No, it's that Spirit that makes us squirm in our comfy, upholstered pews. Holy Ghost? Who died? Holy Spirit? Is that a who or a what? And, for heaven's sake, *when?* –In the Old Testament, or the New?

If we were of the Pentecostal persuasion, the balance would be skewed another way. In Spirit-centered churches, your status as a true believer is evinced in how many "gifts of the Spirit" you display. Especially speaking in tongues; for some reason that one is especially good.

Unitarians, on the other hand, just don't dig the Trinity. That's what Unitarianism means: that God is one. They aren't big on the Holy Spirit—not so surprising since Congregationalists and Unitarians were once one denomination—but they also, especially more recently, haven't been real big on Jesus. Jesus as divinity, that is.

I don't know. Did you ever make pie crust? Pie crust is very simple... supposedly. Flour, water, fat, maybe a dash of salt. It isn't the ingredients so much as it is how they're put together. Too much flour... your crust is dry and crumbly. Too much fat? Heavy and greasy. Too much water? It will be tough instead of flaky. Maybe this thing we call the Trinity, this idea, this concept, this Holy Mystery, is like that pie crust. It works best when we get the balance right. It turns out nicest when we handle it with confidence and a light touch. We don't have to approach it like it was rocket science: no matter how we roll it out, how many times we have to patch it, even if it puffs up a little in the oven—it's still good. I never met a piecrust I didn't like.

"For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life."

This is a Holy Mystery. *The* holy mystery of our faith: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Three manifestations of the Divine Self. Three paths to one destination. Three ways of being that to unity. Three ways to express love, drawing us all into the Big Love.

I can dig it. Stupid questions aside, I'll take a mystery over a sledgehammer any day. Wouldn't you? Amen.

PRAYER:

God of the universe, God of the still center, God who walked in Jesus' sandals, we know that you come to us in many ways—in the wind, in the flesh, in the quiet of the night. Stir up our curiosity so that we are inspired to ask questions, to seek you out, to find out more, to try to

understand. In this way, we grow in wisdom, truth and love. In your three names we pray.
Amen.