

Trinity Sunday 2018
Sermon 5.27.18
Scripture:

Romans 8:12-17

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, 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 a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just 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. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 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."

If you were planning a service of baptism for a baby who's come into the world from two religious traditions, you really couldn't choose a worse reading from the gospel than this one. If the baby you meant to baptize would come with people on either side of this ancient divide between Judaism and Christianity, you'd want to steer clear of John 3:16, or really John at all.

The problem is I'm a lectionary preacher and this is what the lectionary had in store for us. I'll sometimes depart from it, it's true. But today is Trinity Sunday, the last of our holidays before we enter Ordinary Time, so I didn't feel right about fudging this one. Plus, I like a challenge. Most

of all, I trust that God's good news, which came to the world in Christ, is good for those for whom this loving Sovereign God was news and for those who'd long been gathered under His banner. Really, I'm with Paul on this. A Jew who formed the Church that others may gather in, he wrote in his Letter to the Romans, as we just heard, that those who would be in the Church have received a Spirit of adoption. If the Jews are children of God by birth, then the Church is so by a Spirit of adoption.

So, let's see what we can do with this.

John, like every book, biblical or otherwise, comes to us from a particular time. This one comes from early in the 2nd century of the Common Era. This makes it the latest of the four gospel narratives to be written, those four being Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This is also to say that the person who wrote this book, whom I'll call John, and the people for whom he wrote it, the so-called Johannine community, never knew Jesus in the flesh. They were situated well beyond his lifetime and the lifetimes of those who'd known him. They were situated well north of Jerusalem and even Galilee, and thus far removed from where it had all played out. Yes, they'd spent a lifetime hearing stories about him, and they had a particular way of understanding those stories. Yes, they'd lived lives informed by what they'd heard and learned. But the social context from which they heard them was very different from the social context from which Jesus lived them out.

All of this also means that John's gospel comes to us on the other side of the sixty-year crisis that was the Roman War against the Jews. One of the bloodiest times in Western History, with Jerusalem sacked and the Temple destroyed and hundreds of thousands of people killed, this becomes the backdrop of both the emergence of the early Church and of rabbinic Judaism, a fact that we dismiss, though at our own impoverishment. To this point, James Carroll, a Catholic religious scholar, makes a striking claim in his book *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History*: that to read the New Testament forgetful of this war is to read *The Dairy of Anne Frank* with no reference to the Holocaust.

With this shared cradle of origin, and one that was rocked *hard*, Christianity and post-Temple Judaism rose up like siblings—and, as with many biblical siblings, it hasn't always gone well, a fact made painfully clear in John's easy reliance on the term "Jew" to denote anyone who stood against Jesus.

The other gospels are clearer that the resistance Jesus met in this life was with the authorities of his day—the religious authorities and the imperial authorities. The other three gospels—the so-called synoptic gospels—take issue with the powers and principalities, with those who maintained the power structures of their day. Whether they maintained these power structures in earnest (in a belief that some structure is better than no structure and the one they had was pretty good so we'll go with it) or cynically (in an understanding that someone's got to have the power so it might as well be them, and since they had it, they might as well remind everyone of this fact, so bring out the crosses! The lions! The slaves!): these who stand for the ways of the world are the ones with whom Jesus takes the strongest issue.

John, though, is less broad in his understanding about what Jesus was up against in the world. Jesus, in his adherence to *God's* justice and *God's* ordering of society, in his loyalty to the Father's will and way, over and against the emperor's brutal will and the chief priests' calculating way: John is less nuanced in his take on whom to indict as regards this corrupt exercising of power, based as it was on dominance rather than love (as it always is). This, for which the other gospels writers indicted the powers and principalities, the imperial authorities and the religious authorities, the Jewish Herod and the Gentile Pontius Pilate, the Jewish Pharisees and the Gentile centurions, John simply indicted "the Jews."

In a word: unhelpful.

But, John, our writer, was a Jew, and the Johannine community for which he wrote was made up of Jews. Really, the whole context in which they lived and moved and had their being was Jewish. These Jews, though, had crossed the line, had joined the Way of Christ, and for this they were exiled.

And now, cast out of their families, excised from their synagogues, their status as violated minorities within an already violated minority was all the more precarious, and it made the situation all the more ripe for finding the right adversary by which to know themselves. The empire: that was way too ambient. The Roman Empire: that was way too all encompassing, not to mention terrorizing. There needed to be a better rival, a better, safer enemy. Ah! Their own brothers and sisters, their own siblings! The Jews.

We do this, you know. We define ourselves in distinction to others. We *know* ourselves as we know ourselves to be *not*. Sigmund Freud apparently called this the narcissism of small

difference. And it can be done to a degree that isn't destructive. It can also be dialed up to a boiling point.

Ideally, it wouldn't be done at all. Ideally, we would know ourselves by something inherent rather than by something oppositional. Ideally, we would each be as spokes in a wheel whose center is God, wisdom and beauty and truth, our focus and aim, each of spokes in a wheel whose outer edge is yet expanding like, apparently, the universe itself.

For what it's worth, this is how I imagine eternal life—a notion best imagined not as clouds and harps and people wearing white and sporting feathery wings, but as that earliest of images, the burning bush. A bush afire but never consumed, a flame whose fuel never burns out, this is the very image of sustainability, life feeding life rather than depending consumption, exhaustion, exploitation, and death. This is eternal life to my mind: the burning bush.

But this is impossible, right? Actually implemented, *actually* lived, this is impossible. It's impossible not to live life in such a way as costs something else theirs. Relatedly (though it might not seem so), it's impossible not to be mimetic, not to be in imitation of others—imitation which converts so **easily into opposition to others, or competition** with others. It's impossible because it is simply and essentially the case that we *are* mimetic, that we imitate. I mean, just ask Magnus, whose only hope these days is in imitating those he's been given in life to imitate. Just ask Amos, who has thrived these fifteen months because he's a master of imitation and he's been given good people to be like.

The problem, though, is that this, which is essentially true of us, and which lends to our survival and even thriving, can also turn on us.

Magnus will, after all, eventually find himself in a play group, and he'll discover that the best toy in the group is the one that other kid wants, and they'll go after each other for it, slapping, crying; and all the adults will rush to point out, "Look! Here's another toy!" But it won't be as good as the one everyone wants, and precisely because everyone wants it. The fact that someone else wants it is what makes it desirable now to all. So, watch out! There *will* be slapping and crying.

And Amos, eventually he'll enter a peer group and at some point, wanting to annoy someone, he'll decide to copy everything that other one does. And that one other will say, "Quit *copying* me." And Amos will realize, "Ah, that's you get control, even power, over someone else. Be more like that person than even he or she is."

Really, as we all enter more and more into a reality that insists upon it all being zero-sum, a mercantilist attitude that proclaims if someone is getting ahead that means *you* are falling behind because, let's be honest, there are winners and there are losers in every encounter, every *transaction*, and that's that, so you better do you must to be a winner (you loser): the more we go there in life the question as to how to manage our mimetic nature becomes more and more fraught.

Interesting, isn't it, how Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump both claim they're open to a talk whenever the other one decides he's ready?

Mimesis is amusing on the playground. It's scary when it comes to battlegrounds.

I think the solution is to be found in being born from above. Call me a fool, that's what I think.

Born from above, born of the Spirit: you've likely heard it referred to it as "born again," but the truer translation from the ancient Greek is "born from above" or, as Jesus moments later named it, "born of water and Spirit." Born as if into a world where it's not zero-sum, born as if into a realm where what's really needed abounds and what's truly desirable proliferates and therefore the cause for strife has ceased: to have been born of the Spirit is, though, I imagine, like all births, in it being not a result of human willpower but of something unseen, undetected.

This is why I'm always mystified when people seem to brag of their having been "born again." As if they think they've accomplished something great, they seem moreover to insist that others should do this as well—*get* born again. But I think Jesus chose this metaphor carefully, and to be born isn't something any of us decided to go ahead and do, so to be born a second time we should understand as something similarly beyond our control. And that's a tough one for Americans to get behind. We who so like control, we who so commonly mistake control for power, we especially seem to have produced some Christians who think muscling their way into eternal life is simply how you get there. (But if eternal life is a way that would have causes for strife to have ceased, then muscling your way in seems self-defeating.)

To be born, however, is, though all about power, not hardly about control. Really, considering it from the other perspective, giving birth is about as out of control as I've ever been, though it's also the most astounding power I've ever been a part of. So shouldn't we consider that to born of the spirit is similarly powerful, though also out of our control?

I imagine Nicodemus was someone who also liked control. A Pharisee, an expert on the Law and on what it takes to have a life well lived, he perhaps enjoyed as much control as anyone could hope for in his context. Something, though, had begun to nudge him on that, something that brought him to Jesus by night—and not for any clear purpose. He doesn't ask him a question, not at first anyway. He doesn't make any requests. He doesn't mean to argue with him or test him. He just means to tell him, "...we know you are a teacher who has come from God..." though he never even says who's meant by "we."

Today we will baptize Magnus George. We will do so in the words of the Trinitarian formulation—baptizing him in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It will be the perfect way for us to celebrate Trinity Sunday, which would otherwise have me explaining how God can be both three and one—never a good sermon. More importantly, we will do so in a Spirit of mystery and hope: that this moment of decision, which Becky and Jason have made on behalf of Magnus, won't be a moment of division; that the distinction between post-Temple Judaism, and all the complex ways that has played out to today, and the Church, and all of the sometimes grotesque ways that has played out, over these two millennia since both began, will rest assured that there are many ways to be children of God.

Magnus is the latest, and I dare say the loveliest, example of that. But don't get jealous, people. Don't get all rivalrous! We are *all* lovely.

But, I mean, just look at him. Am I right?

Thanks be to God.