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John 3:1-17
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How Much Do We Really Know About God?

We live in the information age. Never before has knowledge been so readily at our fingertips. Especially here on a university campus adjacent to other universities and a Triangle that is famous for its research, we are surrounded by knowledge. With a few keystrokes of our laptops we can find out what a Gall Bladder does, or study up on the ecology of a coral reef, or trace the evolution of the Duck Billed Platypus. We know a lot, and everywhere more knowledge is to be had.

Our text on this Trinity Sunday is a conversation from John's gospel. Nicodemus, a teacher of the law and leader of the Jewish people, approaches Jesus by night, and the two have a conversation. Now Nicodemus is a Pharisee which makes him knowledgeable, an expert, an authority, one of the elite of his time. I want to suggest that we reflect on this story as if Nicodemus is one of us. If Nicodemus were alive today he might be on the faculty or work in a Research Triangle Park lab. Nicodemus would have tenure, a nice-parking space, a min-van and Volvo parked in a two car garage 15 minutes from work. He is a man of knowledge. His life is built on knowledge, structured and focused with very little distraction. Yet Nicodemus senses there is something missing in his life. All his education and study of the law have come up short. And so he approaches Jesus, John makes a point to say, by night, under the cover of darkness when no one else is around and no one else can see him. And in the darkness Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about new birth, about the movement of the Spirit in his life, about being born again.

Like many of us learned people, Nicodemus has been trained in the disciplines of reason and logic, of question and answer, of evidence and discovery. So he responds to Jesus with questions as if Jesus were a subject to be studied, broken down into parts and puzzled through like a roadmap or instruction manual.

Jesus speaks of being born again, and Nicodemus assumes he's speaking literally and peppers Jesus with questions. "How can one be born after growing old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus speaks of new birth, of the Spirit blowing this way and that, never stopping to be pinned down, always shaking the foundations of what we know and don't know, and Professor Nicodemus assumes he is talking about the weather, the wind in the trees.

Perhaps Nicodemus' problem is how he begins. "Jesus, now we know that you are . . ." And there is that language again. We know. Like Nicodemus, we know. Here in a university chapel, on a university campus whose job is to produce knowledge, to know. There is so much we do know. We know about geology and biology, astronomy and literature, physics and economics. We can separate atoms and put them back together again. Our telescopes propel us millions of light years out into the galaxy. Our physicians turn lasers into scalpels. Our soldiers in command centers inside our own borders use satellites to guide missiles into pin-prick bits of land on the far side of the globe. With the click of a button we can access more knowledge than any of us could

master in a 1000 lifetimes. Oh we know, we know.

Perhaps then it is only natural that we approach God in the same way, as if God is to be investigated with a Google search and explained through a good lecture or sermon. As if God is to be puzzled out like some grand mathematical equation. We know about God, we say. We know God is love. We know God is power. We know God is everywhere. Some even claim to know who God blesses and doesn't bless or which of life's mysterious events are God's will, and which ones are not. Yet when we know so much, especially so much about God, it can be difficult to really know God.

Have you ever had that moment with someone you've known for years and years, perhaps a spouse or a child or a parent or a friend, that moment when you just know what he or she is going to say or do in a given situation, and then they do something completely out of character? And in that moment you realize what a great mystery another person is.

At the end of the movie, *A River Runs Through It*, the father, a Presbyterian minister closing in on his deathbed is talking with his oldest son. The younger son had died many years before, a victim of his addiction to gambling, and those who demanded payment on his debts. Everyday the father wondered what went wrong, why he couldn't save the younger son. In the closing scene of the movie, the father says out loud to the older son something along these lines, "Sometimes it is those people in our lives we love the most that we understand the least. Yet we love them anyway. It is possible to love completely without complete understanding."

In my work as a pastor, I've found that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most perplexing doctrines of the Christian faith for the average Christian. How can God be three and one at the same time? People want neat and tidy explanations for the Godhead, as if graphs, charts, number-crunching, and a specific bible verse or two can ferret out the mystery of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Throughout church history Christians have best expressed the Holy Trinity through art and music, metaphor and image. I encountered the Trinity a couple of weeks ago. Our Chapel Choir was invited to sing at Carnegie Hall in New York City, which of course meant they needed a clergy chaperone for the weekend. Our choir sang beautifully by the way. On Sunday morning a few of us went up to the West Side and worshipped at Riverside Church. We walked into the sanctuary and there were people of all types, black, white, Asian, Hispanic, young, old, and everything in between. It was an image of the Trinity. As Jim Forbes got into his sermon, the congregation began to get stirred up, the Spirit began to move, and a few folks started to put their hands up in the air, and I felt sort of silly just sitting there, so I cautiously raised my hands, but that made me feel even more silly so I put them down. A gentleman next to me leaned over and said, "It's okay son, go ahead." And I said, "No it's not, I worship at Duke Chapel." Aside from my awkwardness, it was a picture of the unity in diversity of God who is three in one.

On the front of the bulletin we don't have an equation, or a bite of scripture to give depth to our belief in the Father, Son, and Spirit, we have a piece of art, a 600 year old icon. If you look at that icon, around the table are three figures with both male and female characteristics. There is an egalitarian sense about them, and kind, welcoming expressions on their faces. The three figures surround a table with one open space. As we look at the three figures, we look on from the opening at the table. The figures extend

an invitation, an invitation to take our place at the table, to join the communion of Father, Son, and Spirit, to take part in the Trinitarian life of laughter, fellowship, and beauty, of joy and love overflowing from the Father to the Son, from the Son to the Spirit, and through the Spirit into all creation. Life with the Trinity is a life of abundance where there is always room for one more at the table.

Life with God is not about complete knowledge or complete understanding. The Trinity is not something we as Christians seek to understand as much as it is something we seek to love. It is possible to love completely without complete understanding. So when Nicodemus says to Jesus at the beginning of the dialogue, "Now we know . . ." Jesus takes the next several verses to say to Nicodemus, and perhaps to us, you don't know, at least, you don't know as much as you think. God the spirit blows where God wants to blow and does what God wants to do, and to enter the Kingdom is to have our structured, measured, subdivision lives born again, like from a mother's womb. To encounter the Trinity, to be born again, is to discover that being known by God, being loved by God, being sought by God, falling in love with God, is far more essential to Christian faith than explaining God.

Ten days ago I was invited to give the invocation at the Durham Nativity School's graduation at Duke Gardens. The Durham Nativity School is a middle-school in Durham created to take socially disadvantaged boys falling through the cracks and put them in a structured environment of discipline and study where they get the attention they need to be successful. A lot of folks came to the Duke Gardens from all walks of life, many of them well known and well-heeled members of the Duke community. It was graduation. We knew what was going to happen; some mellow-dramatic speeches, lots of photographs, a nice reception. So we showed up, the morning script written in our minds before we even began.

Then one of the boys got up to speak. He is Latino and he told how his family immigrated to Durham when he was young, how they had to rely on the generosity of others just to survive, how they had to scrape and scrap their way to get by, how he was the first one in his family to learn English. He eloquently told how Durham Nativity School changed his life. Through tears he told us how the school gave him the confidence to believe that he and his family could succeed in this country. How it gave him love and support, and the tools to excel academically and socially. And then, with courage beyond his age, and with a quaky, tear-filled voice, he told us that he was graduating at the top of the class. I looked at all us sophisticated, structured, educated people gathered in the Gardens that morning who assumed we knew what a graduation meant, and how it might go. There was not a dry eye in the entire place. I think the Spirit shook us to the core that hot morning in Duke Gardens and some of us were born again.

Nicodemus says to Jesus, "Now we Know . . ." but the truth is, we don't know, not completely. We don't know when the Spirit is going to show up and blow where it wants to blow. When the Spirit is going to make some sophisticated, bright, put-together professional like Nicodemus fall to his knees when least expected. We don't know when we might be born again.

Nicodemus is going to turn up one more time in John's gospel, over in chapter 19. Again Nicodemus comes by night. John tells us that Nicodemus is a secret disciple who comes and takes Jesus' body down off the cross and prepares it for burial. Under the

shadow of darkness Nicodemus covered Jesus' body with fine oil and spices to hold decomposition and scavengers at bay for at least a little while. He prepared the body with great care and at considerable expense assuming it would be the final resting place for Jesus of Nazareth. He had no idea what would happen three days later, that Jesus himself, and all the world with him, would be raised to new life, born again by the Spirit that blows where it will . . . which only goes to show how much Nicodemus really knew about God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.