



**May 27, 2018 - Holy Trinity Sunday**  
**Given by Rev. Mattei**

*"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." (John 3:6-8)*

I assume you will concur with me that life is an amazing, mysterious experience, full of discoveries which are at times joyous and at times painful. We start learning how to navigate life from the very first breath we take. Watching children grow physically and emotionally, mastering new motor and intellectual skills, taking in new information and making life choices through continued conversations and guidance, exploring relationships and creating friendships, makes parents proud and boosts their confidence in parenting. Even when parents observe and accompany their children through battles of self-doubt, fears, emotional pain and spiritual temptations, although stressful and scary, they are carried by a sense of being in it together.

It's the connection, the belonging, the sheltering that gives growing pains a certain bitter-sweet component. One has a sense of not being alone but held close and protected, of being seen and understood, and the struggle becomes less unusual and more universal: many have gone through growing pains and challenging moments and come out the other side all right.

But the experience of growing pains is not limited to childhood or teenage years. At any stage of life, we are challenged with physical suffering, emotional struggles and spiritual battles. Change is part of growing and tensions are a side effect of change. Tensions can be as intense as the stretches the body undergoes to or a soul is faced with. Most of us can feel those tensions in our joints or other parts of the body. Some of us may grieve interpersonal relations gone sour or mourn the loss of loved ones.

Wanting to avoid tension and maintain the status quo is an emotional response that is habitual to all of us. And there is a season for it. Yet, it is not a helpful or healthy response when it becomes a philosophy of life, a *modus vivendi*, and prolonged beyond its reasonable utility. A popular Neapolitan saying encourages people to keep the old and tried and avoid the new and untested. This might be a proper strategy to cement a new skill or even to establish a new habit. But it becomes obsolete when one discovers that doing things differently can improve the outcome and produce more appealing results. Growing is scary because it involves risk, and one is willing to risk only when benefits are understood and the one suggesting the change is trusted. It is unlikely that we will engage in change for the sake of change. Motivation comes

from new understanding and trust in self and in the authority figure presenting the need for change.

Jesus is such an authority for us. And actually, not just Jesus but also God the Father and God the Spirit. Nicodemus is the one, in today's gospel, seeking understanding and exploring the necessity for change for personal improvement and spiritual growth. He recognizes Jesus as "a teacher come from God" (John 3:2) for he has seen the signs (miracles) that Jesus performed. Yet, Jesus reveals to him that he is not ready to understand heavenly things unless he is born again from above (vv. 3 and 12). How much I would enjoy being born again with a new body and renewed energy whenever I have body aches or illnesses, or simply find myself in stressful situations! But we experience over and over again that life is not something we can control.

Nicodemus comes in the night toward the light of Jesus: this is a significant movement toward the willingness of questioning oneself and exploring another way of life. This is the first, fragile step towards accepting that Jesus is of God and with God. However, it is evident by the questions and reaction to Jesus' answers that he is not ready for greater revelations and understanding because he is too attached to the way things are: there is no desire as of yet in Nicodemus to challenge the status quo. But to see (i.e. perceive, enjoy, participate in, belong to) the kingdom of God, Jesus states, one needs to consider the possibility of being born again by the power of God and undergo a transformation. Nicodemus was challenged to expand his notion of what the kingdom of God might look like. And so are we.

Nicodemus left Jesus with no clear indication that his heart was changed on the spot. But that Jesus-encounter marked his life. We see him later trying to be a sensible voice in defense of Jesus during a public discussion about who Jesus is (John 7:50) and then later on bringing spices to anoint Jesus' body (John 19:39).

And so it happens to us when we mull over new ways of the Spirit, who blows in unexpected and unfamiliar ways (John 3:8). The Spirit only requires us to trust, and in so doing we gain new life and new energy. Our consideration of others expands, and our understanding of who decides who and what is acceptable in the kingdom, who is welcome, who belongs, who sets the rules of engagement, who expands boundaries and who cements relationships is looked at from the perspective of God's all-inclusive love as testified by the boundaries shattering actions of Jesus who embraced and spoke to the outcasts (the lepers, the strangers and the downtrodden) as well as those at the margins of society (women and children, orphans and widows, the poor.)

The Spirit witnesses to the will of the Father and the Son applies God's kingdom rules to life. What Father, Son and Holy Spirit are up to is to have a love relationship with creation where God is all in all and all creatures are connected to one another through the Spirit of Life. No one is alienated from that Life unless one cuts oneself off wanting nothing to do with God and passing judgment and blame on to others, hurting and condemning, raising oneself to the heights of God. When we set ourselves above God or try to act as agents of God's judgment and wrath against others, when we close our heart to anyone whom we consider unclean and

unworthy, then we have crossed a line and have disconnected ourselves from God's plan. We can get so puffed up that we begin to even enjoy our outrage and our self-righteousness when we do that. When we fall into that trap, we end up worshiping ourselves. This is idolatry.

The Sacrament of Baptism levels the plane field: no more Greek or Jews, slave or free, male or female (Galatians 3): social status, gender and wealth have no significance whatsoever. Those are not the criteria God looks at when God blesses someone: a life in God is beyond all that. But in our sinfulness, we try our best at reinstating boundaries and differences, and fight to keep people separated and in different camps. Fear, instead of love, continues to control our lives. It is fear of the unknown, fear of the different that dwarfs and controls our growth in the Spirit. If the Spirit helps us to say "Abba, Father," and "Jesus is Lord," then why do we keep listening to our fears and are motivated by them? They become our new idolatry.

Our worship on Sunday morning is life-giving when we refocus on the One we worship, and our actions the rest of the week are a practical application of our worship. Yet, when we feel stretched beyond our comfort zone, do we have the courage to deeply look inside ourselves and entertain the possibility (just the possibility) that it may be the Spirit of Jesus nudging us to enlarge our heart, expand our understanding and take new risks? When we, as a community, are faced with challenging questions, complex and maybe uncomfortable issues, are we ready to engage in conversation instead of shutting down and protect ourselves by leaving the dialogue or the church altogether? Are we ready to stop, notice the desire in us to step out of the community circle if anyone threatens to change the way things are, and seek God's will for the community with mutual care?

The LGBTQ community has been historically mistreated and victimized and even now barely tolerated even within the sacred walls of the Church. For centuries the Church has contributed to the negative portrayal of sexuality, gender orientation and gender identification. That legacy continues to influence our attitudes towards gays and lesbians today. Yet, the Spirit has also invited the Church to broaden the understanding of kinship. Today, we are invited to manifest God's all-encompassing love to all our brothers and sisters in the faith, and to reaffirm that our Baptismal vows proclaim that our connection in the Spirit takes us beyond gender orientation.

Nativity is presented with the opportunity to grow in understanding and love. I would like to dispel a rumor that is causing some distress in some members of our faith body and clarify that there is no "secret" plan to activate *any* program this Summer to make us *more* welcoming. In general, there will be no changes made unilaterally without the consultation of the whole community. On the contrary, the idea is to hear all opinions and to become familiar with the needs of all, longings and fears included. The plan

voted on three years ago and shelved for the time being, was one of finding ways to make our value statement visible and to nurture a welcoming environment for all. Using an inaccurate comparison, if we say that we welcome all people including those with different physical abilities, can we limit ourselves to speaking words of welcoming or do we show it by creating ramps, planting handrails, widening restrooms to fit wheelchairs, adopt an enhanced sound system and offering large print bulletins? The same action-oriented attitude may be cultivated in regards to the LGBTQ community: how can we show that we mean what we say?

I encourage all of us to explore this issue with boldness and with the assurance that all needs matter and will be given proper attention. We need to engage in conversations to understand more, to encourage one another on the journey, to challenge all of us to faithfulness and to discover creative ways to manifest our commitment to our values.

I affirm once again my commitment to listen to everyone's concerns, fears and dreams. And I intend to support people in having open and direct communications where we can find one another's heart and manifest the Heart of God in our community.

I invite us to pray for the Spirit of wisdom on all of us, the charity of Jesus and the creative power of God the Father to assist and bless us. Amen.