

Perspective and Paradox

John 3:1-17

Thank you to the sixty five people who pledged last week to pray daily for St. John's – to say thank you, meet us, guide us, and show us our next faithful step. To pray and watch God work. That's what we're up to. Of the 65 people who pledged to pray daily, 31 of you opted for the multi-tasking options. You are praying when you stop at an intersection and the red light reminds you of the Holy Spirit. You are praying while you brush your teeth, while you fold laundry or do other chores, while you're in the shower. How's it going? If you haven't pledged yet, there are pledge sheets available on the first cabinet in the Gathering hallway. You can detach the small card and take it with you and place the pledge sheet in the Discovery Process box that's also on the cabinet.

Multi-tasking is the order of the day any more. And today is no exception. It's Memorial Day weekend: a time to remember with humility and gratitude those who gave their lives in service to our country. But Memorial Day weekend has evolved into the start of the summer season. So more than one thing happens this weekend. Since a three day weekend meant our son Matt could come home, we had a party last night to celebrate my husband Barry's latest book that was just published. Add to this mix a funeral yesterday and the church's calendar and we multi-multi-task. The way the church tells time, today happens to be Trinity Sunday. It's the only day in the church year that focuses on a doctrine: the doctrine of God as three-in-one. I think we have this doctrine because Christians, from the time of the first Pentecost, experienced *God* as a multi-tasker: as a God who creates, redeems and sustains people. The official name for that experience of God is the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father is God as formlessness. The Son is God as form. The Holy Spirit is God as the very life and love and energy between these two.ⁱ This teaching was not formalized until the fourth century. It's alluded to in the Bible, but not spelled out systematically.



The reason this doctrine was formalized was because the church was seeking to explain its multi-faceted experience of God. And different people can experience the same thing in different ways. For example, when you look at this picture, what do you see? This is a famous image that has played a significant role in teaching. It captures the paradox that the same image can be interpreted in completely contrasting ways. Here's a story that goes with this image: *An old woman is touring a portrait gallery and comes upon a portrait of herself. She stops and looks at it for a while, considering its likeness to her. She notices the angles of the nose, the fur wrap over the shoulders, and the placement of her eyes. She decides that it's a passable artistic rendering of herself. Just then a young woman walks up to the portrait and begins to study it diligently. She tilts her head, stares a bit longer and giggles. The first woman walks up to her and says, "Excuse me, but what are you laughing at? This happens to be a special portrait." The young woman says, "Well, I was just giggling at the way they captures my eyes! I didn't even know someone painted a picture of me!"*

The first woman was shocked. She said, 'That's not a picture of you, that's picture of me!' Then the second woman looked confused. They started to argue rather loudly about it when finally a curator walked by. The curator interrupted their argument and said, "Excuse me ladies, but this portrait happens to be of both of you. If you'll just look here, you can see one face and outline, but if you look here, you see another." [The young woman's chin is the older woman's nose. The young woman's ear is the older woman's eye.] And so from that time forward each woman could see both herself and the other woman in that portrait, and their vision was changed forever.ⁱⁱ

It's a paradox. The same image can be interpreted in completely contrasting ways. Can you multi-task with your eyes and see both the old woman and the young woman at the same time? I can't. I wonder if when we experience God, we do it in one dimension at a time. Like when we enjoy the beauty of creation, we see the creator's handiwork. When we come to Holy Communion, we taste and see the presence of Jesus, in with and under the bread and wine. When we're drawn to prayer and sense something beyond ourselves, we experience the Holy Spirit at work. And yet they're all the same one God, seen and experienced in different ways at different times, in a dance with one another.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus is teaching Nicodemus to see on two dimensions at the same time: the physical and the spiritual. Nicodemus is confused because he's taking Jesus literally when he talks about being born from above. Jesus is talking about being transformed by the Spirit. The word *above* is often translated from the Greek as *again*. Being born from

above is about learning to see with spiritual eyes. It's about living with God in the center of your life and seeing things from God's point of view. Yet we also live in the physical world. Two things can be true at the same time.

And yet the phrase *born again* has become associated with the Christian religious and political right. And so when some people hear or see that phrase, *born again*, they think of something completely different than what I think Jesus means here. Like seeing the old woman and not the young woman, or vice versa.

There are so many words and phrases, like "born again" that can be heard completely differently depending on your perspective, depending on your experience. I used one of those words in my sermon last Sunday. I used the word "trauma." But "trauma" is such a loaded word these days, I don't want us to get distracted from the work we're doing together because of a word. Even though words do matter. Thank you, Patricia Ponte, for pointing that out. I couldn't agree more. So much about understanding meaning depends on context and conversation.

Suffice it to say that this congregation has been through some challenges. And each of you, just like the image we've been looking at, have a different experience and a different interpretation of what has happened over the recent and longer term past. Now you have opportunities, with the Discovery Process, to listen to one another, and to understand the experiences and perspectives different people bring, to the *adventure* of discovering your next faithful steps.

Thankfully, we have a God whose nature it is to multi-task for the sake of love, to give our lives meaning, and purpose, and hope. To speak of God as Trinity is another way to say God is more of a verb than a noun. That God is what convince us that we are created for love: to be loved by God, and to love God and one another in return. So let's keep praying – and watch God work. Amen.

Pastor Dana Runestad

27 May 2018 ~ Trinity Sunday,

ⁱ Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Ian S. Markham and Samantha R. E. Gottlich, *Lectionary Levity: The Use of Humor in Preaching*, New York: Church Publishing