

“I Love You” – Pr Jim Sprengle, Holy Trinity Sunday – May 30, 2021

- I. **John 3:5 & 16** ¹⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” And, ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”
- II. **I read a fascinating story about Michelangelo the other day.**
 - a. Of course, Michelangelo was the great artist and sculptor who painted parts of the Sistine Chapel and sculpted David.
 - i. Interestingly, he was a contemporary of Martin Luther, with many of his greatest works coming just before the Reformation began in the year 1517.
 - b. When Michelangelo was in his 70’s, he decided to sculpt a very difficult scene for his grave. **[see picture]**
 - i. It was Jesus after His death on the cross, lying on His mother Mary’s lap, along with Mary Magdalene, and Nicodemus.
 - ii. He never did finish the sculpture, because after 8 years of working on it late into the night, he became so frustrated he tried to smash it to pieces
 - iii. The whole piece was just too much for him, and it seems that he ran out of steam... because he did most of his famous work in his 20’s and 30’s, he may have been trying to prove that he was still capable.
 - c. What intrigued me about the whole story, was that many believe the figure behind Jesus, Nicodemus, was actually a self-portrait of Michelangelo...
 - i. You see, in his later years of life, Michelangelo wanted to express his own born again experience... because his artwork had become an idol and he regretted it.
 - ii. In fact, if you go to Florence, Italy and see this sculpture, it has a poem Michelangelo wrote across from it...which in part says that in his foolish youth he had made art an idol and a king, that painting and sculpture satisfy no more... but my soul turns to Love Divine... who opened His arms on the cross for me.
 - d. No matter how much Michelangelo served God (he spent his whole life working for the church) – his work could not make him right with God... and it could not give him true peace
 - e. Perhaps he came to know this in the end.... but only God’s work and love toward us really matter.
 - f. That should be our focus on Holy Trinity Sunday... what God does for us
- III. **It seems reasonable to teach about the Trinity on this day.**
 - a. The Bible teaches us that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are all God – not 3 gods – One God in 3 persons – co-equal – co-eternal... the Trinity in unity...

- i. And if your mind did a little blip and checked out on me there... it's because the mystery of the Trinity and who God is can be very hard to understand!
- ii. Just wait until I read the Athanasian Creed in a little bit – as much as it sounds repetitive, it was necessary to clearly describe God so people get it right.
 - 1. But if we spend all our time trying to understand how God can be the Holy Trinity – we miss the most important point.... What God did and continues to do for us.
- b. You see, God the Father cares for all my needs through creation – Jesus the Son has saved me by His death and resurrection – and the Holy Spirit is with me now, helping me to have faith and stay connected to Him.
- c. I can know about God – I can serve Him all my life like Michelangelo or be super smart like Nicodemus... but knowing about God is not the same as knowing God's love for me.

IV. **Nicodemus came to know what God did for Him.**

- a. Our Gospel lesson begins with a man who belonged to the Pharisees – a group who mostly saw Jesus as a threat to God's Law and teachings.
- b. Yet, he comes to Jesus by night, presumably to have a conversation without anyone else knowing – because spending time with Jesus publicly might cost him his position or worse.
- c. At first, he gives Jesus respect by calling Him rabbi and saying God must be with Him.
- d. In some way, Nicodemus might be questioning his life as a Pharisee, as Jesus drew him into this conversation by His teaching and miracles.
- e. The first thing Jesus says is all people must be born again to see God's kingdom... and Nicodemus can't seem to fathom being born again because he can only see it from HIS works and how HE must do something to be born again.
- f. Jesus then tells Nicodemus that he cannot get to God by his own works or effort, but Baptism by water and the Holy Spirit will give him this new birth
 - i. In other words, only God's work and love toward us really matters... we do nothing to receive His grace

V. **Do you see how we can get this all mixed up too?**

- a. So many people... so many Christians have made good works their idol – in other words, they trust in themselves more than God.
- b. It's not surprising that this happens because sin entered the world through Adam and Eve, and humans have tried to do it on their own ever since.
 - i. We want to do the work of being born again – like Nicodemus who assumed he had to do his part

- ii. We want to set the terms for God and our work for him... and the very work that should be a blessing for God becomes our idol... like Michelangelo.
- iii. What I'm saying is that we do not live in some kind of constant spiritual transaction with God...
 - 1. I do good stuff, then He gives me good stuff... I help out here, and He blesses me there... I am good, He therefore loves me
- c. If I go to church just to get to heaven one day or get on God's good side – I'm trusting in my own works
- d. If you read the bible so that you can be smarter than the next guy and tell everybody what you know about God – knowledge is your idol!
- e. When we look at others who don't seem to be measuring up to our standards and feel superior to them because we go to church or we read the Bible or go to bible studies, or we are doing right by God – we forsake the very nature of God's love – that it is for ALL people.
- f. Even if we pour our lives into works for God, just like Michelangelo and Nicodemus... if it is not based on faith and love – it is idolatry
- g. It is only out of God's love for us that we can know love... God's gift of faith to us that we can know and love Him...

VI. **At the end of his life, Michelangelo got it.**

- a. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he was brought back to his baptismal grace where the name of God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were placed on him – where he was born again.
- b. He came to see that it wasn't so much about what he could do, rather it was about what God did, was doing, and would do in his life... and even his eternal life.
- c. He finally came to understand that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son... and it had nothing to do with what Michelangelo did for God
 - i. As he painted and sculpted for decades – knowing about God and doing things for Him resulted in emptiness.
 - ii. Yet, as we see in his last sculpture, the face of a man who was born again in love for God.
- d. God in all His power and majesty – in all the mystery about how He can exist and three in One – showed His love for us in this, while we were still sinners... He laid down His life for us. (Romans 5:7)
- e. Nicodemus, Michelangelo, and a crowd of witnesses that includes you and me have all come to know this Jesus because He first loved us. (1 Jn 4:19)
- f. And if you ever wonder about God's love or what He was willing to do for you... just remember this statue from Michelangelo... put your own face in the place of Nicodemus and look into the face of Your lifeless Savior.
- g. God tells each one of us individually in the clearest of terms – "I love you"
- h. I love you so much I will give up everything to have you, even My life.

- i. That is our God – the one who loves us beyond measure and calls us His own... even though His love cost Him dearly.
- j. No matter if you don't fully understand the Trinity, the real blessing is what He does for you – calls you His own by the power of His name... In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.



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