

Grace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Once again – I drew the short straw and have to, I mean – GET to preach on Holy Trinity Sunday, or as Pastor Schul and I named it last year – Holy High Heresy Sunday. Because there is not one single analogy for the Trinity which is not some form of heresy or another. A friend of mine, Pastor Phil Ruge-Jones, creates memes each week to help inspire preachers. His note attached to this week's rendition said: "Remember you are preaching in the Trinity, not on it." Keeping this in mind, I'm going to preach IN the trinity... not ON it.

When my brother Gabe and I were younger, we went through different phases where we fell in love with one particular movie or another. We would watch the same movie on repeat for MONTHS. We literally wore out VHS tapes – yes – it was so long ago, that that was a thing.

We went through a *Home Alone* phase. I drug him kicking and screaming through a *Dirty Dancing* phase. There was a *Jesus Christ Superstar* phase, and a really, really long *Mannequin* phase.

How many of you remember the movie *Mannequin*? The main characters are a human and a mannequin who comes to life and they have this great romance and adventures. It's as good as it sounds!

In the movie there is a character named Hollywood Montrose who was played by Meshach Taylor. Hollywood was this outrageously dressed, sing-song voiced, flamboyant, dramatic, emotional, over-the-top individual. He is the quintessential embodiment of a stereotypical gay male that one could find in a movie. Roger Ebert in his half star review of the movie (I told you - it's that big of a cinematic masterpiece!) actually referred to this character as "an anthology of stereotypes." Hard to miss!

AND when Gabe and I were children, and teenagers, and well into early adulthood, neither of us ever clued in to the fact that this character was in fact gay. We just thought he was the zany sidekick, despite Hollywood's persona and lines in the movie such as "Albert left me. He said my thighs were too fat. Do you think my thighs are too fat?" Because clearly – WOMEN are referred to as "he" and often named ALBERT are concerned with fat thighs. Yeah – we super missed that one.

So it turns out - we are not the only people in the history of the world to have completely missed the obvious. In our Gospel this morning Nicodemus also misses the obvious. He comes to Jesus by night. The word night can also be translated as darkness. So it leaves some ambiguity as to whether or not Nicodemus is sneaking to meet with Jesus under the cover of darkness to keep his

Pharisee friends from finding out about this meeting, OR, if he is coming to Jesus in an unenlightened state. Perhaps it's both.

The author of John uses light and darkness to describe those who “get it” and those who “don't get it”. So Nicodemus could be a nighttime skulker or someone who doesn't get it.

He tells Jesus that OBVIOUSLY Jesus came from God because no one can do these signs (John's word for miracles) apart from the presence of God. Jesus answers him – “Very truly, I tell you” – or as Cindy put it in our staff meeting this week – Listen up IDIOT! (Which is not at all inaccurate – John's version of Jesus has some fierce snark going for him!) “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

The Greek word “anothen” is another one of those ambiguous John words. Our translation interprets it as “above” but it can actually be interpreted three different ways – “above” “anew” or “again.”

Nicodemus, being a Pharisee, who John usually depicts as staunch traditionalists as well as scriptural literalists - hears it in its most literal form as “again”. Jesus most likely was using it to mean “above” or “anew”.

Confused – Nicodemus asks – “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?” – Again...

he's being super literal (and honestly maybe a little sassy in response to Jesus' snark) and is trying to figure out how an adult human reverts back to a fetal state. I guess you'd have to reverse caesarian that or something.

Once again Jesus responds – “Very truly, I tell you” (Snarky) “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' final statement is: “How can these things be?” And then he just fades into the sunset, or, more likely, the darkness. Karoline Lewis had this to say about this encounter: “We are left to wonder what happens to Nicodemus. His last words to Jesus are “How can these things be?” and in his conversation with Jesus he does not make much progress. He interprets Jesus' words on a literal level... He is not able to recognize what Jesus offers, and more importantly, who Jesus is.”

Jesus' response changes tense and he is no longer directly addressing Nicodemus who has disappeared, but is instead addressing us. He explains that he has tried to teach us about earthly and heavenly things – and we just don't get it.

Jesus concludes with the ever famous John 3:16-17 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but 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.”

What is interesting about this parting shot is that the word “believe” is not a noun... it’s not something that one obtains or possesses. It’s a verb. An action.

We tend to talk possessively about “our faith” or “having faith” assuming that it’s a sure thing; that believing is as easy as acquiring. But faith is not a possession that one gets or something that one has – it is something that one does. As a verb it is subject to the ambiguity, uncertainty, and vagueness of being human.

If belief is a verb, then it cannot have correct understanding. We must make effort to understand and to engage. If you look at Jesus’ criticism of Nicodemus it is clear that he believes that Nicodemus, based on his education, social-standing, etc... is capable of making more of an effort. As I’m sure any educator could affirm – there is a difference between a question that a student asks because they are struggling to understand and a question that a student asks because they cannot be bothered to struggle to understand. Jesus seems to be accusing Nicodemus of falling into the latter category.

Karoline Lewis also had this to say: “How will we fair? Do we really think that we could have understood Jesus any better than this well-versed, well-educated Pharisee? And if we do, what makes us think so? What makes us so sure? Because we have two thousand years of Christianity under our belts? Because we have more theological insight? Because we have more faith?... Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus suggests that believing in Jesus is indeed an ambiguous effort. What does it mean that faith is ambiguous?”

If belief is an action but we struggle to grasp the nature of what is being asked of us, what chance do we really have? Or will we just find ourselves well-meaning skulkers in the darkness with Nicodemus?

Fortunately, our text doesn’t end with ambiguous faith. We get John 3:16 and maybe more importantly John 3:17. For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only son, so that everyone who actively engages in a verb-like ambiguous faith in him, may not perish but have eternal life.

If we are unsure of whether we even know what that means or if we qualify, (spoiler alert – we don’t, on either account) it is worth remembering that the author of John is often sarcastic and does not end there. Instead we are finally left with this assurance: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

As I told our confirmands – if they get nothing else out of the confirmation process – they need to remember this: It is not about us, or what we do, or what we do not do. It's not about our actions or lack of actions or our ambiguous faith. It is not about whether or not we are dwelling in darkness or light. – it is about Jesus Christ and what has already been done for us. We don't earn salvation and we don't earn grace. It was freely given.

In other words, Jesus has our back, even though we are idiots who have to VERY TRULY be told things. Even though we often just. don't. get it. Amen.