

Only, Only, Only

Trinity Sun. – 5/30/21 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: John 3:1-17 Past. Keith Besel

Introduction

- ✘ One of the most recognizable symbols for us Lutherans is the one that we have up there on that banner today, Martin Luther's coat of arms, also called "Luther's Rose". And along with it there are the words that we see on the banner that make up the three-fold motto of the Reformation: *Faith Alone, Grace Alone, Scripture Alone*.
 - ➔ That word "alone" in the Latin that Luther used when he came up with the motto is "sola", which means "only". Only by faith are we justified in this life; only by grace are we saved eternally; only by Scripture do we learn of, and judge all teachings of the truth.
 - ➔ Of course each one of these "solas" comes out of and is connected directly to Christ. For Jesus is Himself the only way and means by which anyone can ever be saved. Saving faith is only in Christ and it is only by the grace of Christ that Holy Scripture, God's only Word is fulfilled.
- ✘ So, we Christians, if we honestly desire to remain connected to Him for salvation, must listen carefully to Christ when He speaks about another set of "onlys" on this Trinity Sunday in His teaching session with the Jewish leader Nicodemus.
 - ➔ He teaches about a number of core doctrines in this text, one of them is about the Holy Triune God. Here Jesus spells out that The Holy Spirit brings man to the only knowledge that saves – that of entering The Father's family and kingdom only through rebirth, which comes only through water and The Spirit, as it is earned and given to us only by the saving work of God's only Son.
- ✘ In His teaching of Nicodemus (and us today) Jesus separates each of this three "onlys" and introduces them with the same words in verses 3, 5, and 11 when He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you...".
 - ➔ In the original language that Jesus used, instead of "truly, truly..." Jesus actually said, "Amen, Amen...". "Amen" actually means "So it shall be". Just think how significant this is then, that before Jesus even tells us what He's going to teach, each time He proclaims His "Amen" upon it. He stamps it as a Divine declaration of truth; a certainty that can never change, whether we fully grasp it or not.

I. Only by being born anew (vv. 1-3)

- ✘ The first "only" is in verse three, where Jesus answers Nicodemus' original inquiry and says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."
 - ➔ Nicodemus actually comes to Jesus at night, for fear of repercussions from his Jewish colleagues and he starts things off with a "only" of his own. He admits that he and the Jewish leaders have had to conclude that the "only" way Jesus could be doing the miracles He's doing is if God is with Him.
 - ➔ That's a pretty big step; a good first step for Nicodemus, but it shows that he still doesn't know that Jesus is the only Son of God. He has not come to understand or believe in the Triune God as the only God.
- ✘ And that's why Jesus responds as He does. Nicodemus needs to know that there is "only" one way to know the true God; only one way to be saved from the consequences of sin, which is death and condemnation apart from God.

- That is through rebirth. The Greek term for this is “γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν”, which literally means to be “begotten anew”. That term “begotten” focuses specifically upon the Father’s connection in producing a child, which helps us see that this rebirth of which Jesus is speaking comes about only by God the Father’s creative and miraculous work.
- ✘ So much of the time, we and our world fall into thinking that we can know God – or even define what we want our god to be – by means of our own control or choosing.
 - Some believe that reading and studying and becoming more intelligent is the way to know God. There are doctors of Philosophy from very prestigious schools of learning that we often see on documentaries about “Finding Jesus” for example, who are presented as “expert theologians” whom we should trust. But with all of their intelligence, we often find out that what they are teaching actually contradicts with God’s own teaching in Scripture.
 - Or we find ourselves struggling when science, which is technically nothing more than the study and exploration of all that God has created; when it gets put in the place of God and we think that science should be what defines God and His actions, instead of the other way around. Remember God created science. Science itself never creates anything. It merely explores and studies what God has brought into being.
 - Similar to that is the common misbelief that the best way to “know God” is through our human reason and logic. But again, God is the One who created and gave us our reason and logic to use, but always in service to Him. The very definition of God as the only, all-powerful Creator and Savior means that there will always be some things that we human beings, who have limitations to what we can know and understand, will not be able to fully grasp about God.
- ✘ And so, the “only” way you and I can ever become a part of the kingdom of God; that is to enter into a close and intimate relationship with God Himself, is if He initiates the process and “rebirths” us by His life-giving and life-sustaining power. “Only” one who is born again from God the Father can be a part of the kingdom of God.

II. Only by water and the Spirit (vv. 4-8)

- ✘ This concept of being “born again” was clearly something Nicodemus didn’t get when He heard Jesus proclaim it. But let’s be honest, if you or I were in his shoes, who among us could believe it on our own?
 - Nicodemus was after all, at that time, confined to only being able to use his earthly reason and thinking to try and figure out a concept that he is being taught from God Himself.
- ✘ And so Jesus answers with the second “only” in verse five, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”.
 - Remember, this birth of which Jesus is talking about is not the same as our fleshly birth from our mother’s womb. That’s where Nicodemus understandably got hung up. But you see, that Greek term I told you about earlier, “γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν”, has an alternate translation. Not only can it mean “begotten anew”, but it can properly mean “begotten from above” as well.
- ✘ This is not of the flesh folks. What we’re talking about here is from God, and Jesus says here that it is specifically from “the Spirit” – that is the Holy Spirit. Again you and I, in our fleshly human power can do nothing – absolutely nothing to bring this spiritual birth about any more than we had anything to do with our own earthly birth.
 - This is why Jesus says in verse six, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”. And so, the only way to have a God-pleasing, God-designed spiritual life is to be “born”, as Jesus says, “of water and the Spirit”.

- You can't "make a human decision" to follow Jesus. You can't "ask Him into your heart" and thereby tell Him what you want Him to do. Nor can you just claim yourself to be a "spiritual person" and then pick and choose and define your own set of beliefs and definitions of what is true and what is not, as has become the most popular thing among churches and people today.
- ✘ No, this is the Holy Spirit's miracle alone. And so, "only" He gets to define how the miracle of faith and new life in God's kingdom comes about and is sustained.
 - And the means of God's life-giving grace comes to us through Baptism, where God's perfect Word of truth is combined with ordinary water, administered in the One name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, to create and give to us His gift of faith; to thereby adopt us into God's eternal family of believers!
 - At that moment, we are a whole new person; one who knows God as it was impossible to know Him only moments before. As Paul says in Romans 6, it is at baptism that we are connected directly to Jesus and His saving work for us. And in 2 Corinthians 5:17 he also says, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come".
 - And all of that comes to us freely without cost; without any work on our part – "only" "by water and the Spirit".

III. Only the Son's testimony of the Triune God (vv.9-17)

- ✘ The third "only" comes from Jesus when Nicodemus shows that he is still struggling to get a handle on all of this that Jesus is teaching him. He asks in verse nine, "How can these things be?"
 - And Jesus' response calls him to task because he has not yet been able to let go of his fleshly ties; of his connections to the things of this world, and that's why Nicodemus is still unable to believe and trust in all that Jesus is trying to teach him.
 - "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (v.9). In other words, Jesus says, "You are a Pharisee Nicodemus. You're supposed to be a spiritual leader for God's people Israel, and yet you show Me here that you can't even grasp these basic spiritual things from God and His holy Word."
- ✘ But let's be honest folks, we all have the same struggle as Nicodemus don't we; in varying degrees and in our own unique ways. We don't want to let go of certain things in the world that God's Word says we should not be doing or believing. We don't want to let go of control in our lives, even if it is giving in to God's control and His definition of truth or His design for what it means to live in His family and kingdom. We still want to have at least one pinky finger on top of things and be able to define God and God's ways according to what will allow us to be popular and powerful and "successful" in our world.
- ✘ But Jesus says in verse 11, "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony". So who is Jesus talking about when He says, "we speak..." and "we know..." and "we have seen..." and "our testimony"? Who is this plural of which He, Jesus is a part?
 - Some say it is Jesus and John the Baptizer (Lanski). Others say it is Jesus and the whole company of God's prophets (Luther). These are both good possibilities that we can't definitively say are either right or wrong.
 - But today, on Holy Trinity Sunday, there is one more possibility that a number of the early church theologians believed to be the answer (Chrysostom, Cyril & Chemnitz).

- ⌘ When you consider that Jesus has already pointed Nicodemus to see that “only” God the Father begets us anew, through “only” water and the Holy Spirit, it makes sense that Jesus, the “only” begotten Son would now be including the Father and the Spirit with Himself in the plural; in the “we” that speaks and gives testimony to Nicodemus and the rest of us regarding the things of heaven as Jesus says He is speaking about now in verse 12.
 - ➔ This is similar to Genesis 1:26 where we hear the Trinity speak among themselves and say, “Let us make man in our image”.
 - ➔ So when Jesus says, “We speak of what we know” (v.11), only Jesus, as God in the flesh, is able to speak what the Father and the Holy Spirit know. This is the great truth of the Holy Trinity – Three persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but always and only One true God.
- ⌘ And here is what He speaks, what has become known as “The Gospel in a nutshell”. Verse 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”.
 - ➔ “Whoever believes in Him...has eternal life”. Peter says in Acts 4:12, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” “Only” Jesus came to earth as man. “Only” Jesus took our sin and our place upon the cross and rose in victory over death for our salvation and our eternal life.

Conclusion

- ⌘ Only, only, only; “only” by birth from above, “only” by a baptism of water and the Spirit, and “only” because Jesus speaks for the Father with the Holy Spirit can we know and believe in the one true God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
 - ➔ “Truly, truly” we believe, “only” by His gift of grace. Amen.