

SERMON: Love Times Three
TEXT: John 3:1-17

5-30-21

Last week I had one of those days where everything seems to be going wrong. I had called a plumber because my water heater wasn't working. At first, he said it would have to be replaced, *and* it would have to wait until the next morning. When I got up the next day, I discovered that some strange electrical things had happened in the kitchen. Not immediately concerning things; just strange things.

Shortly after the plumber arrived, he shared some more strange news. There was nothing wrong with my water heater, except that there was no gas getting to it. He went outside to inspect the gas line and discovered an earthquake shut-off valve. When he showed it to me, he explained that these were popular maybe 25 years ago, and they were designed to react to heavy vibration by closing off the gas valve. The plumber said it was probably a lawnmower going by that caused enough vibration to trip it.

I knew it was a dumb question, but with all the weirdness going on I decided to ask him whether any of this could somehow affect my electrical issue. Without hesitation, he answered, "No, not at all." But then he suggested, "Maybe it's just the second thing in your trifecta." I knew right away that he was referring to the

idea that bad things tend to come in threes. First it was the water heater. Next came the electrical. And now since he mentioned it, I was nervous, waiting for the third bad thing to happen.

But actually, the fact that the water heater problem was really a gas problem turned out to be good news instead of bad news, because removing the earthquake sensor from the gas line was several hundred dollars less than replacing the water heater.

Today - Trinity Sunday - I want to turn that negative superstition into a positive affirmation of God's love. Good things come in threes through God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

When you start digging into it, the Trinity is a tough concept to grasp, and it's been the source of quite a bit of controversy and conflict in the church since the beginning of Christianity: Is there a hierarchy of persons or are they all equal? Did God the Father come first, then later send the Son, and the Son sent the Spirit? Do they perform different functions or do all of them work together as a team? Are they of one substance or different substances? This question is especially tricky.

Think of water that can be found in the form of a liquid, a solid, or a gas. But it's all still water.

Another illustration that came to mind is especially apt, since this is also Memorial Day weekend. I was seeing photos on Facebook of gravestones at a national cemetery. Quite often those gravestones have the name engraved at the top, then underneath it might say, LOVING HUSBAND, DEVOTED FATHER, LOYAL FRIEND. One person shared love in three different ways.

Every life comes from God, our Father and Mother, the Creator of all living things. When God came to earth in the flesh, God was born. He was named Jesus. He was Emmanuel, God with us. And when Jesus ascended into heaven, he left the Holy Spirit to be our advocate, our helper, our sustainer until Jesus comes again. This makes it seem like they didn't all exist from the very beginning, but they did. They are inseparable. Each one is God; together they are God. They are the fullness of God who was, who is, and who is to come.

And they all love us. And there's enough love in that Holy Trinity to cover every person in the world.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus talks with Nicodemus, answering questions that lead to a discussion about God and the Spirit. Nicodemus - a religious leader - shows great respect when he calls Jesus *Rabbi* or *Teacher* and acknowledges that Jesus has come from God and has the presence of God within him. Jesus gives an answer that seems ill-fitting. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus is confused, thinking about only the literal birth of the flesh. But Jesus is talking about a spiritual birth. "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."

This is not all there is, this life in this body on this earth. There is more than what we can see, hear, taste, touch, smell. The Spirit is something we can't see. "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." After more questions from Nicodemus, Jesus scolds him along with all the Pharisees. "We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet

you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." When he refers to heaven or the kingdom of God, Jesus is talking about his Father God, who loved the world so much that he sacrificed a part of himself. God gave his son as a gift to the world. "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."

I like how theologian Frederick Buechner describes the Trinity. "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery." (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking; A Theological ABC*, 1973)

The Trinity is God's LOVE TIMES THREE. It's as if God had so much love for us, that he needed more ways to show us.

As the Father, God goes before us to guide and direct us. As the Son, God walks beside us as our companion and friend. As the Holy Spirit, God gets behind us to push us to keep going and to catch us when we fall. God is all around us and within us.

So shouldn't our response be more than just belief? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have everlasting life." If we continue to think in terms of LOVES TIMES THREE, it's also what God commands of us. To love the *Lord our God* with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And to love our *neighbor*. As we love *ourselves*.

Eternal life starts here and now. I heard something recently that really stuck with me. That Christianity is not so much about getting into heaven as it is getting heaven into us.

May we be convinced that good things come in threes. May we all know the fullness of God's love as our Creator, Christ, and Comforter. And in response may we share LOVE TIMES THREE... to the glory of God! AMEN.