

**Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta**  
**“The Most Important Conversation” (John 3:1-17)**  
**May 30, 2021**  
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When you look back on your life, what are some of the most important conversations you have ever had? Perhaps you can recall important conversations with your mom or dad in which they spoke words of wisdom, words of affirmation, words of love, or conversations with your childhood friends in which you shared your crazy secrets or found out you both had a crush on that same kid at school. Perhaps you can recall a conversation you had with a teacher who helped you understand how you are actually wired and gifted, and inspired you going forward in your life—or a conversation with a coach who even after you played the worst game of your life, still told you he believed in you and that you would remain in the starting lineup.

Perhaps you can recall a conversation with an employer who surprised you with a promotion, or a conversation in which you were told about company downsizing. Perhaps you can recall a joyful conversation with your future spouse as you dreamed together about your future or that heartbreaking conversation with your ex-spouse when that dream turned into a nightmare. Most vitally of all, perhaps you can recall a conversation in which you actually felt the reality of the presence of God with you and the love of God for you.

The gospel passage appointed for this Trinity Sunday is about the most important conversation ever in the life of a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was intrigued about what he was hearing about Jesus—how Jesus preached a gospel about divine love and divine forgiveness—and healed people who had lost all hope of ever being healed—and touched people like lepers who had not been touched in years—and befriended notorious sinners who had never had a true friend in their life. Even though the majority of his fellow Pharisees, threatened by his ever growing popularity, dismissed Jesus as an imposter or a charlatan or a fraud, Nicodemus still wanted to learn more about Jesus, but without his fellow Pharisees knowing about it...so met with Jesus on a rooftop at night.

The most important conversation ever in the life of Nicodemus is the setting for today's gospel passage. In this conversation Jesus spoke about how all three Persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—work together to minister the unconditional love of God to the world, including Nicodemus, including you.

Nicodemus tells Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God” (John 3:1-2). Then Jesus begins telling Nicodemus that in order for people to “see the Kingdom of God” they need to be “born from above...born of water and Spirit...born of the Spirit...you must be born from above” (John 3:3-7). Then Jesus describes the often surprising work of the Holy Spirit—“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” (John 3:8).

This mysterious and unpredictable work of the Holy Spirit in ministering God's love to us mirrors the mysterious and unpredictable wind—and of course points to one of Bob Dylan's most powerful songs:

How many roads must a man walk down  
Before you call him a man?  
How many seas must a white dove sail  
Before she sleeps in the sand?  
Yes, and how many times must the cannonballs fly  
Before they're forever banned?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind  
The answer is blowin' in the wind

Yes, and how many years must a mountain exist  
Before it is washed to the sea?  
And how many years can some people exist  
Before they're allowed to be free?  
Yes, and how many times can a man turn his head  
And pretend that he just doesn't see?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind  
The answer is blowin' in the wind

Yes, and how many times must a man look up  
Before he can see the sky?  
And how many ears must one man have  
Before he can hear people cry?  
Yes, and how many deaths will it take 'til he knows  
That too many people have died?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind  
The answer is blowin' in the wind

A little later in the conversation, having already spoken about the Holy Spirit being the one who enables us to be “born from above”, Jesus then speaks about how God the Father and God the Son would make that possible on Good Friday:

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may 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 (John 3:14-17).

Jesus refers here to an incident that occurred during Israel's sojourn in the wilderness recorded in the Old Testament Book of Numbers. They had been attacked by poisonous serpents and begged Moses for help: “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us” (Numbers 21:7). The writer of the book of Numbers continues:

So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live (Numbers 21:8-9).

The children of Israel had indeed sinned by speaking against God and speaking against Moses—and the result of those sins was deadly bites from poisonous serpents. What was true for these children of Israel then is true for you and me today: we too have sinned against God and others.

The result is that we too are bitten by poisonous serpents—be that the serpent from the Garden of Eden, the devil, serpents of other people, even the serpents of ourselves. These poisonous bites are so deadly that we cannot save ourselves. We need God to save us because only God can save us.

The good news of the gospel is that indeed God saves us. How?

Again, as Jesus told Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Jesus refers to himself here as “the Son of Man” and tells Nicodemus that he would “be lifted up” just like that bronze serpent in the wilderness, and that in the same way the Israelites who looked up at that serpent were saved, all those who look up to Jesus on the cross will be saved as well.

Why? Are the sins we sins against God and against others God’s fault? No. Are the bites we suffer from poisonous serpents God’s fault? No. Then why would Jesus allow himself to be lifted on a cross on Good Friday? Because the love of God for those suffering from the bites of poisonous serpents is so great that God would do anything to save us—and so just as Jesus told Nicodemus in perhaps the most famous verse in scripture, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Then Jesus further emphatically tells Nicodemus, “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.” In other words, Jesus does not come to you when you are suffering from the bites of poisonous serpents to tell you, “Just wanted to let you know you that you are suffering because it is your fault, because you reap what you sow, because the wages of sin is death and today is payday.” Those are words of condemnation and judgment, not words of the gospel.

The gospel is that Jesus did not come to condemn you because you were already condemned; rather Jesus came to save you by being condemned in your place.

Jesus walked down many roads, including yours. Jesus, who created the mountains and will be there when they are washed into the sea, never turned a blind eye to the suffering of those bitten by poisonous serpents, never pretended that he just didn’t see.

When Jesus looked up, he did see the sky, the sky he created, and Jesus has heard them when people cried—Jesus has heard you when you have cried—and Jesus actually cried himself at the tomb of Lazarus and then over Jerusalem days the week of his passion and death. And Jesus knew that countless bites from countless poisonous serpents have caused too many people to die.

And yet, Jesus still subjected himself to the poisonous bites of serpents that falsely accused him, serpents that proclaimed he was guilty of things he had never done, serpents that chanted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” And just as Jesus had told Nicodemus in that most important conversation that night, Jesus the Son of Man was lifted up on the cross not to condemn the world but to save the world, not to condemn you, but to save you—because Jesus was condemned in your place.

So “how many seas must a white dove sail before she sleeps in the sand?” Well, the white dove of the Holy Spirit will sail as many seas as are needed to minister the reality of the unconditional love of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the forgiving love of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the eternal love of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to your heart.

Apparently Nicodemus never forgot that most important conversation with Jesus, for after Jesus’ death on the cross John writes, “Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds” and along with Joseph of Arimathea “took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the custom of the Jews” (John 19:39-40).

So on this Trinity Sunday may the same Holy Spirit who assured Nicodemus that God was with him and God loved him remind you anew of the presence and love of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—so you can look to your Savior on the cross...and live.

Amen.