

## **“Not an improvement, but a new life!” (John 3:1-17)**

**“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, 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 said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 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. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.’”**

“Grace” – that is our new name. What a beautiful name. We could say it summarizes what the Gospel is about. What the Christian faith is about. What the Church is about. About God’s grace. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound...”.

But there is a problem with this grace. To be more specific, there is no problem with God’s grace, but there is a problem with us. We struggle to understand it, and even more we struggle to receive and rejoice in God’s unconditional grace.

Yes, sure, probably we all would insist that we know what it is. But too often we fail to live as if we truly understand it. To put it in our Lutheran slang – too often we fail to believe and live out the wonderful truth that we are here by God’s grace alone.

We are here by God’s grace alone, but if we don’t believe it with our whole hearts, then we are robbed of the divine joy and excitement. Then we may struggle to rejoice seeing others who are less perfect than us being brought into God’s family.

Then we may be self-righteous and condemning to those who are not like us, and then it is almost impossible do desire to proclaim the Good News of God’s grace to them, for they are not as virtuous as us, and maybe they don’t deserve to be here.

Then the statement “I believe that I am saved by God’s grace”, remains just that. A statement... a theological phrase. Correct in itself, but without much impact on our lives. And we, Lutherans, have been accused of this, and often rightly so.

You may be wondering, – who is our pastor speaking about? Do you want to know? About all of us, but especially about the best human beings among us. About the purest and most perfect Christians among us. About those who have lived the holiest, the most virtuous lives.

Because it is moral, good people that struggle with this issue of God’s grace the most. If you have gotten low and dirty in your life, suffering the consequences of your sin and foolish choices, messing up your life, hurting others and hurting yourself, it is much easier to understand and also receive and rejoice in God’s grace.

Then it is easier to realize that I don’t deserve it, and to see it as a wonderful gift of God, who gives you a new life. It is much harder, if you believe that you have been good your entire life. Born in Christian family. Raised in the Church. Been in the Church your entire life. Doing all the right things and supporting all the right causes. What grace would such perfect person need?

Our today’s Gospel reading helps us to see that we all are in need of God’s grace and it also teaches how to receive and grow in it. Who needs it, how to receive it and how to grow and rejoice in the grace of our holy God the Father?

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.” This is important. This man Nicodemus. If you could think of someone who would be perfect and without sin, then he probably would be as good a candidate as anyone. A man of the Pharisees. Remember, they wanted to lead God-pleasing lives.

They were obsessed about doing everything right. Imagine that you would get up in the morning, would start your day with prayers and from then on would try to make your every thought, your every word, your every activity pleasing to God and trying as hard as possible not to sin.

And that would literally be at the center of your life – trying to please your God and avoiding at any cost to do anything that may displease him. That’s Pharisees. But Nicodemus wasn’t just a regular Pharisee. He was one of the best, one of the most learned, the teacher of Israel, as Jesus said, a ruler of the Jews.

Whatever virtuous your life has been, whatever hard you may have tried to please our God, I am quite sure that no one among us is even remotely as accomplished as Nicodemus was. He was one of the best, of the noblest and most virtuous members of his society.

This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” The question that we all need to be asking was burning in his mind.

What should I do to see the Kingdom of God, to be found worthy on the last Day? He recognized that Jesus was someone sent by God. He was humble enough to come to Jesus, he, a ruler of the Jews, the teacher of Israel. What should I do? Teach me!

Remember how good he was? And he was still looking for answers. Why? “Good” people in our society usually don’t ask these questions. Even “good” people in the Church sometimes don’t care about it much. Then why?

Because when you really strive to lead a holy life, you soon realize, that it is impossible. You fail and fail again and again. Our efforts don’t lead to peace and good conscience. There is never enough, you can never be good enough, if you are serious about pleasing God with your holy life. That’s why this question remains: “What shall I do?”

We have only this brief description on their conversation. Many things are left untold. What was Nicodemus hoping to hear? “Okay, you are almost there, you just need to improve a little bit, to do a bit more of this and that... and you will be okay.”

That would make sense. We could relate to that. This is why Jesus answer is so offensive. So shocking. “Sorry, Nicodemus, you mean well, but... you can’t improve yourself enough.” What?!

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. [...] Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Just imagine, your entire life you have tried your best, you have searched for the wisest teachers and greatest examples to imitate, and then someone says: “That’s totally not enough, you need to be born again.”

“Nice, thank you, Jesus!” It is not hard to imagine that someone who has poured out their heart trying to be good, can feel really upset hearing that their efforts amount for ... nothing. Perhaps you have heard people saying:

“If this is what you teach, if you are saying that I am not good enough, then stuff your religion, stuff your Church, I don’t need it...”. But not our brother Nicodemus. He is genuine and humble enough to listen to Jesus.

Nicodemus asked, “How can these things be?” And in response Jesus reminds him about something that happened with Israel on their way from Egypt to the promised land. Those Israelites, they were miserable. Stiff-necked people, as God Yahweh called them. Even after they had witnessed with their own eyes all the mighty works,

signs and wonders that Yahweh had done, they kept complaining and muttering, and despising God's miraculous care for them. On one occasion, enough was enough. I will read to you straight from the book of Numbers:

"Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he takes away the serpents from us." So, Moses prayed for the people.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So, Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live." (Numbers 21:6-9)

What about this story? What does this mean, and how does this help us to see that everyone needs God's grace if they want to see God's Kingdom? Israelites were bitten by fiery snakes. What can you do when you are bitten by deadly snakes?

Sure, you can decide that from that moment onward you are going to eat only good and healthy food. More, you are going to exercise and lead a healthy lifestyle. Will that help? The deadly poison is in your body.

It will lead to death. Nothing you do can change it. You need a help from outside. You need someone who is able to help you. This is such a great illustration of what is wrong with us. We all have been bitten.

The bad people, the good people, the life-long Christians and the worst among sinners. All of us have been bitten by the ancient deadly serpent. His poison is in our blood, it is in our hearts, it is in our minds. Our sin.

Spiritually we are poisoned through and through. Our bodies and souls, our thoughts and desires. What can we do? "Okay, now I will try to be really good, I will do a lot of virtuous acts and will avoid doing anything that is wrong. Will that help?"

Ye... sure... No! Regardless of how hard you try... the deadly poison is in you, and there is nothing you can do about it. You will die. Unless ... someone helps. Unless there is someone we can look at and live.

That is why "the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." What? It seems strange to our reason. But that is what our God commanded Israelites to do and promised that it will work. And... it did work.

And that is what He commands us now and promises that it will work. Fix your eyes on Jesus! "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved

through him.” Yes, He is the One. Turn to Jesus, look at Him and you will live. That easy... Look at Him and He washes you with the water of regeneration, He cleanses the poison of sin out of your system by His Holy Spirit. He feeds you with His holy and life-giving meal. Look at Jesus, stick with Him, follow Him!

He gives you more than healing, He gives you a new birth, a new life, He makes you a new creation. “How can this be”, we may wonder. I don’t know. I can’t explain to you “how” our God does it. No one can.

We just know what Jesus has revealed and what the Holy Spirit has recorded for us. We all are bitten and going to die, and only if we stop looking at ourselves, only if we stop trying to improve our condition on our own, only if we center our entire lives on Jesus, the Kingdom of God is ours.

Then we will see our brother Nicodemus as well. Rejoicing with all the God’s saints. Not with those who were good and perfect in this life. But with those, who were willing to receive God’s grace. With those, who looked at Jesus, who trusted Him.

Our God doesn’t explain to us all His mysteries. But He fulfills all His promises, and that is much more important. When we are not proud and self-righteous, when we are humble enough to listen to Jesus speaking to us, when we realize that we need God’s help, – then whoever we are and whatever we have done, He welcomes us, and He pours His grace and His Spirit over us.

And even if we don’t understand “how”, He gives us a new life. And only when it sinks in that we can’t see the Kingdom of God by improving our old selves, only then we can fully rejoice in God’s undeserved grace. Then we long to get more of Jesus, to be filled with His words, to hang out with His people.

And when His grace rushes through our veins, only then we can rejoice in God’s grace for others. Then we don’t compare ourselves with them, we don’t look down on them, for we know that we all have been bitten, and we all need to be born again.

Then we are quick to show God’s grace to everyone, and we can’t wait to point them to the only cure that can change everything, – the Son of God, our brother Jesus Christ, who was lifted up, so that we all could have eternal life.

May the Lord bless us that we not only understand God’s grace, but are changed and saturated with it, and that our lives both as individuals and as the community of God’s saints daily reflect the name of our congregation! Grace...

Amen.