

“The Answer to the Riddle”

Sermon: Year B, Feast of the Holy Trinity

Texts: John 3:1–17, Romans 8:12–17

Preached: May 27, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you, and peace, from the God who creates, who redeems us, and who dwells in us. AMEN

Riddle me this, Batman! What is seen in the middle of March and April that cannot be seen at the beginning or end of either month? [ANSWER: the letter “R”] How about this one: A girl has as many brothers as sisters, but each brother has only half as many brothers as sisters. How many brothers and sisters are in the family? [ANSWER: There are three brothers and four sisters.] Or this one: “I have cities, but no houses. I have mountains, but no trees. I have water, but no fish.” [ANSWER: A map. I think this one was created before Google Maps showed us every house there is.]

OK, here’s one last one: “The Father is made of none: neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created, but begotten. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son: neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits. And in this Trinity none is before or after other; none is greater or less than another; But the whole three Persons are coeternal together, and coequal: so that in all things, as is aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshiped. He, therefore, that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.” So, what’s the answer? Beats me.

OK, that last one isn’t technically a riddle. Technically, it’s part of the Athanasian Creed. And the Athanasian Creed is much, much longer than this one snippet, but the whole thing reads just like the example you heard. To be exact, it was not written as a riddle, but rather as an attempt to *answer* a riddle, a specific riddle: What is the nature of the Trinity, this mysterious Three-in-One, One-in-Three that we often talk about, but never quite seem to be able to describe? Both the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds were drafted to pin down an answer to the question, but let’s be honest: For most folks, it ends up sounding like a hopelessly complicated riddle. And I’m going to tell you right now, if you came on this Trinity Sunday thinking I was going to explain the riddle of the Trinity to you, you will be sorely disappointed.

Our Gospel lesson is also full of riddles, but they aren’t necessarily obvious to us because of the problems of translation. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is often portrayed as speaking in riddles, often uses word play to respond to people’s questions. This episode is a prime example of it. When I was a child, the Baptists used to sing a hymn describing this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus:

A ruler once came to Jesus by night to ask him the way of salvation and light.

The Master made answer with word clear and plain: “Ye must be born again.”

And from this passage, Evangelical Christians have developed a whole language and theology centered around “being born again.” But you see, the language Jesus uses is anything but “clear and plain.” Our translation completely masks what’s happening here, because Jesus is using a word with double meanings, and it’s pretty much impossible to translate words like those from language to language. When Jesus says to Nicodemus, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” does it strike you as odd that Nicodemus responds with a seeming non sequitur? “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” The only way that makes any sense at all is to know that Jesus, as a good riddler will do, is using a word that has double meanings. He says that someone must be born *anōthen*, which means *both* “from above” *and* “again, a second time.” Jesus intends the former, and Nicodemus hears the latter. He misses the point of the riddle. He hears on a literal level, and misses the spiritual implications. It’s pretty clear that he’s not getting it. So Jesus explains more, and does so by using more riddle language.

You see all those words about wind and spirit? In Greek, as in Hebrew, they are exactly the same word: *pneuma*. Spirit. You see, in the languages of the Bible, there is no distinction: wind, breath, Spirit, it’s all just one word, the same word. Remember in the very first verse of Genesis, where it says that the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters of chaos? It could just as easily be translated, “The breath of God, God’s wind, moved over the face of the waters.” To give you a taste of how confusing what Jesus is saying really is, it you could just as easily hear it as, “What is born of the breath is breath,” or “What is born of the wind is wind,” and later, “The Spirit blows where it chooses.” So, pity poor Nicodemus, who by all measures is a brilliant,

learned man, a person who is used to talking about the things of God, one skilled in debating theology and interpretation of the scriptures, trying to follow the argument Jesus is making, wading through these confusing references, all this talk about Spirit—or is it “wind” or “breath”?—and being born again—or is it “from above”? His response demonstrates his bewilderment: “How can these things be?”

And then Jesus tries to explain the riddle, but in still more mysterious language. He talks about the Son of Man being lifted up on a pole the same way Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole so that people could look on it and be healed of the venom that was poisoning them, could be saved from perishing. In John’s Gospel, this theme of Jesus being lifted up, both in humiliation and suffering and then in triumph over death, is a recurring theme. But that only makes sense when viewed through the key to the riddle, which is given in verses 17 and 18. And the answer to the riddle is simply this: Love.

The answer to the riddle is a God who loves the cosmos so much that God would give that which was most precious, would go to the furthest extremes, use the most unlikely path, in order to demonstrate to us how great that love is. The answer to the riddle is a love that lays down its life for others. The answer to the riddle is a love that does not condemn, but that seeks to give life. The answer to the riddle is a love that stirs up life where there has been only death, or where there has been only the potential for life. The answer to the riddle is a love that forgives, a love that loves before the beloved has even responded, a love that does not condemn, but only looks to redeem and restore. The answer to the riddle is love. To be born from above is to love.

All too often, though, the church has behaved just like Nicodemus. We come to Jesus as Christian Pharisees who are fascinated by teaching and doctrine, and we get engaged in debating riddles. The creeds that we cite are the fruit of bitter conflict over how exactly one must define doctrines about God. When we say in the Nicene Creed, “of one being with the Father,” or as our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers have gone back to saying it, “consubstantial with the Father,” it is because people were literally coming to blows, even killing one another, over whether Jesus was *homoousios* (“of the same substance”) or *homoisios* (“of similar substance”) with the Father. The Athanasian Creed was written because the debate about the relationship of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit had continued to simmer and boil, and thus the Athanasian Creed pronounces harsh anathemas and condemnation of those who do not understand these things in a precise way.

These creeds do a valiant job of summing up the efforts to explain who God is, and they are to be honored. But I think that the creeds try to answer questions that people aren’t necessarily asking anymore, and in the process, they themselves become new riddles layered onto the old riddles. We could make people’s heads spin—and our own, to be honest—with doctrines and systematic theology. There is a definite place for the debates and questioning and theologizing, don’t get me wrong. Doctrine does matter. But these are not the questions the world is asking. This is not the riddle people are trying to figure out. The riddle people are trying to figure out is, “Why am I here? What is the meaning of all this? What is life for? Am I loved?” As the church, we can do no better than to respond with Jesus’ own answer to the riddle: The answer is always love. We are here to love like God loves. We are here to serve, as Jesus served. We are here to lay down our lives for others. We are here to have abundant life and to share it with others, life that does not end with death, but eternal life that has already begun. And all because of love. Not love that we gin up all by ourselves, but love that has existed from the beginning of creation, the love of the Creator for the cosmos, the love of the Creator for the Beloved Son in whom God takes delight, the love of the Spirit who gives birth to us, who gives us the breath of life, God’s own breath, who stirs us with God’s own wind, who circles and broods over the face of ongoing creation, and who dwells in us, making us co-creators with God of this new cosmos that is being birthed even as we speak. It is a love that looks on us and chooses us, adopts us, makes us daughters and sons, beloved of God just as Jesus Christ is beloved, in spite of our failings, in spite of our wandering off, and all for the sake of love, a love that knows no limits. It is a love that overflows from the Trinity, and rains down on us. It is a love that we are called to pour out on others, driven by gratitude for such love, a love that moves us where it will, blowing us to places we never expected to go. The answer to the riddle is active love, demonstrated in service.

By the way, Nicodemus just sort of disappears after this encounter with Jesus. We’re not told how he reacted to these strange, puzzling words. He went back into the night. We could be left to wonder whether what Jesus told him made any difference. But he does show up again in the story as told by John. Following Jesus’ crucifixion, Nicodemus comes with Joseph of Arimathea, now in broad daylight, and gently, lovingly, prepares Jesus’ body for burial. I think he had finally gotten the answer to the riddle: It’s all about love. AMEN