

A Sermon Preached by
Fr. Edwin Smith for Trinity Sunday, Year B
June 7th, 2009 at St. Thomas, Menasha, Wisconsin

Anne Graham Lotz, daughter of Ruth and Billy graham, wrote a short, but profound book simply entitled, "Why?" The subtitle is, "Trusting God when you don't understand." It is based on the story of the raising of Lazarus, and offers hope to those who do not understand why God allows certain things to happen.

But, she says something else very profound. She says there is a significant difference between belief, faith, and trust.

She says that belief is the consent of the mind; faith is a choice of the will; and, trust is a commitment of the heart.

In today's Gospel lesson, we have the familiar story of the nocturnal visit of Nicodemus to Jesus.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, but unlike others of that sect, he is curious about Jesus and his message. By necessity, he comes at night presumably to avoid being seen by anyone else. Jesus responds to him by saying, "I tell the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Nicodemus asks, "How can a man be born when he is old?"

And, Jesus replies, ". . . No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit."

The words, "born again," have come to have all sorts of meanings in our modern day. Some in the media, who do not understand any better than Nicodemus did, have chosen to speak as if those who claim to be born again Christians are radical conservatives of the worst order. Even some of our own denomination tries to distance themselves from the whole born again label.

Nicodemus was at that first step: belief. He believed Jesus was a teacher sent from God. That seems like a small step, but it was a large one for a Pharisee. It did not mean he believed Jesus was the Messiah or anything close to it. He just admitted that he believed Jesus was a teacher sent from God because no one could do the things Jesus did if God were not with him.

You know, many Christians are at that step. They come to church, some more often than others. They believe Jesus was a great teacher, even that God was with him, but that's as far as they are willing to go.

It may be no surprise to you that many Jews, Muslims, and others believe the same thing. They have considered the evidence, weighed the alternatives, and made and consented in their minds to believe.

To go further, many Christians make the same confession of faith we do every Sunday in the Nicene creed. Some use the Apostles' Creed. They are making a decision to believe.

At some point, Nicodemus took the next step: faith -- a choice of the will. The Sanhedrin was a select group of Pharisees. It amounted to the supreme court of Jewish law. Nicodemus was a member of that body. And when they were ready to drag Jesus before them and condemn him, it was Nicodemus, and he alone, who

In John 7:50-51 is reported as having stood and said, "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" Of course, they ignored him, using the excuse that no prophet comes from Galilee according to scripture. They even threw a barb at him asking if he, too, were from Galilee.

But, imagine the courage it took for Nicodemus to speak up as he did, when he did. I don't think it is a stretch to say that he had moved from a consent of the mind to a choice of the will – from belief to faith.

There are those Christians who have, likewise, made that move. The move from deciding to believe that Jesus is who he said he is to choosing to accept him as their savior – the very one whose death on the cross for their sins, and whose resurrection from death has assured them of forgiveness of their sins and has assured them of eternal life.

Now, Nicodemus makes one more appearance in scripture. It is at the time of his burial. You will recall that in John 19:38-42 Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. He was accompanied by none other than Nicodemus. It was Joseph of Arimathea who provided his own burial tomb for Jesus' body. But, it was Nicodemus who provided the mixture of myrrh and aloes in which to wrap the body. John 19:39 reports that it was about seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes. That is very, very significant, because it is that amount of those spices which were dictated for the burial of a king.

Nicodemus has taken the step from faith: the choice of the will, to trust: the commitment of the heart. He has recognized and accepted in his heart that Jesus was a king. Not just a teacher from God,

Not just a prophet, but a king – the king.

Many Christians believe Jesus is the Messiah – the savior -- and who have faith in him and the power of his resurrection, but who have yet to take the last step, which is to trust him.

A few years ago, God gave me the words of the prayer for revival in our diocese. The bishop had asked a group of us to each write a prayer for our diocese.

I prayed about it. I sat down at my computer keyboard, and the words just came. I remember at the time wondering why I had written in the last part, "that all may come to know Jesus as their savior and lord, in whose name we pray." Most prayers put those words, "Savior and Lord" in the opposite order: "Lord and Savior."

I have come to believe the proper order is as the words were given to me. It is entirely possible to believe Jesus is savior, to have faith in him, but to not take the last step, which is to make him lord of your life. To trust him – to make that commitment of the heart.

If you are one of those who has yet to take that step, I encourage you to do so this very morning. To ask him to come into your heart and to take control of your life.

Now, it would a serious act of neglect not to mention that today is Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday

Is one of those Sundays when experienced rectors graciously allow their assistants to preach. As one of my mentors told me years ago, anyone who preaches for more than five minutes on the trinity is into heresy.

I don't intend to preach heresy, but I do want to take few moments to point you in the right direction toward understanding the nature of the Trinitarian God we worship.

Saint Patrick used the shamrock to explain the trinity. Hence, this shamrock as my visual.

But, if you will turn to page 864 in the prayer book, you will see the creed of St. Athanasius.

I will not go through it with you, but I want to commend it to your further reading. If you read it very slowly, and probably more than once, you will have a pretty good idea of what we mean by a Trinitarian God. It speaks clearly to the three persons of God, the unity of God, and the relationship of the three, father, son, and Holy Spirit. I have placed copies of the creed in larger type at each entrance to the church. Feel free to take one home with you. That way, your understanding may increase and I will avoid the temptation to heresy!

Read, mark, and inwardly digest. It is that which we believe, that in which we have faith, and hopefully that to which we commit our hearts.