

"Understanding Understanding"

Text: John 3:1-17

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit - our Triune God - be with you all. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Are we saved by what we understand or by what we believe? Most Christians, recognizing that we are saved by *faith*, would undoubtedly answer that we are saved by what we believe, whether we fully understand what we are taught in God's Word or not. In fact we freely admit that there are many truths taught in the Bible that we really don't understand at all, but which we nonetheless believe to be true. We commemorate one such truth on this Trinity Sunday morning – the triune or three-in-one nature of our God.

But maybe we shouldn't be so quick to claim such ignorance, such lack of "understanding" – not, at least, until we understand understanding, as God's Word uses the term. This is the particular aspect of our text on which we focus this morning. Our text is a most familiar section of God's Word, found in the Third Chapter of John's Gospel, and it contains one of the best-known and beloved passages in all of Scripture:

ESV **John 3:1-17** *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² 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." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ 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?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ 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." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ 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. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you*

do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ ¶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ 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.

So far the very words of God. You are blessed each time you hear the Word of God and treasure it. May God fill each of us with the truth that is above human manufacture or improvement. To this end we pray, **"Sanctify us by Your Truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!"** Amen.

Speaking of truth, Pontius Pilate once posed the rhetorical question to our Lord: **"What is truth?"** Pilate is routinely condemned for his question, but shouldn't be. The question itself was solid – actually a truly great question. Pilate is *rightly* condemned for his arrogance, and for the fact that he was in no way looking for an answer to his grand inquiry – *because he believed there was no answer*. That was a symptom of Pilate's real or basic problem, which was that he did not know the one true God. The irony is that he was asking the right question at the right time to the right person. In fact he was asking the question of *the one person in all of history* that could have given him an authoritative answer.

Which is exactly the point. There *is* such a thing as truth, but the moment mankind rejects the one, true God, man also sentences himself to an endless and hopeless search for absolute truth. Why? Because truth begins and ends with God. He is the source, the one and only authority. That which comes from God is truth; all that disagrees is falsehood and distortion. So also Scripture teaches us that **"the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."** Acknowledging God is the *beginning* of wisdom simply because no truth can exist *apart from God*. If God says that something is true (no matter how unlikely, illogical, or unreasonable) it is true. If he says something is not true, again, no matter how reasonable, logical, or widely accepted, it is not true.

Human beings love to imagine that we know much more than we actually do. It's the old *"you don't know what you don't know"* carried to its ultimate extreme. Mankind has been given a limited intelligence and a certain measure of understanding as to how at least a part of God's

creation works. The problem is that man not only needs to accept the limits of his God-given reason and understanding, we need to learn to accept as true whatever God tells us is true, and as false whatever God tells us is false. There are certain things that we have been told about God and certain things that we have experienced relating to our God, but these are all partial images of God – puzzle pieces that tell us a small part, but by no means all. God himself is beyond the scope or grasp of human understanding or intellect. Man's reason and intellect are simply not up to the task of analyzing and comprehending Almighty God. He is beyond us, and yet at the same time he is within us. This paradox only serves to reemphasize the fact that the mind of man cannot serve as the judge or arbiter of right and wrong, true and false.

This is one lesson we must learn well, for failure here will send us on paths that can only lead to destruction. This morning then we examine both truth and understanding, and how they relate not only to the Trinity, but also to the ultimate truth of the precious saving gospel of Jesus Christ.

Absolute truth is dictated by God alone. God's truth does not always agree with human wisdom and understanding, which is why God's Word is so precious and necessary. There is little doubt that that's why the Psalmist pulled that Word of God close to his breast and declared it **"a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."** So also in that same 119th Psalm the inspired writer also proclaimed: **"Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD! ² Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with the whole heart!"** The Psalmist clearly recognized his own limitations, his own tendency toward foolishness, dishonesty, and error. God's Word was his only truth, his only sure guide. On our own we are capable only of great foolishness, ignorance, and deceit.

Man has God-given reason and intellect, but such things can only get so far. Human beings need to learn to subject reason and intellect to God's Word. It is there God visits us, teaches us, humbles us. There we find, for example, great truths that transcend the mind of man. This fact is confirmed by the passage we use at the end of every sermon, but the very familiarity of that passage, along with poor translations, can tend to cloud or hide what God is actually there telling us. The passage is from Philippians 4:7, **"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."** God's Word does not here teach us that divine truths of even rather simple things like "the peace of God" are beyond our ability to grasp or understand. What the passage actually says is that the source or origin of "the peace of God" exists outside of man. In other words, God isn't here

telling us that we cannot possibly understand something as basic as "the peace of God." He is telling us that this "peace of God" did not originate in the mind of man. Think of it in terms of a favorite song or melody. Have you ever heard a moving, emotive piece of music and thought to yourself, *"I could never in a thousand years come up with something so moving, so beautiful"*? That's what the passage is referring to – not that we are unable to understand, grasp, or appreciate something like "the peace of God," but that something so amazing could only have originated with God himself.

This truth that "the peace of God" transcends human invention is not beyond our ability to grasp, understand, and believe. In fact we see evidence all around us every day. Every manmade religion seeks peace with God (god) through the actions of man. Man must provide. Man must do. Man must earn. Only God's plan is different. God's plan was that he himself would do what mankind needed to be done. God's plan was that he would send his Son to provide the goodness that mankind needed. In God's plan for establishing peace between God and man, man is always and only the recipient. God is the provider. This truth was communicated to mankind nowhere more simply or more beautifully than in verses 16-17 of our text for this morning: **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ 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."** The peace that God has established is that mankind is not saved by doing, but by believing that God has done all for him.

The fact that much of what we learn in God's Word conflicts with our human intellect does not make it untrue. Yet we also need to rethink our frequent admissions that "we don't understand." We need rather to *understand understanding*. Consider, for example, the triune nature of our God. Who hasn't puzzled at the truth of the Trinity - one God, three persons? This is the particular aspect of our God that we acknowledge on this Trinity Sunday, and I'm guessing that all of us readily admit that we *"really don't understand this aspect of our God."* We need to rethink that position.

Jesus in our text chastised Nicodemus for his lack of "understanding": **Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"** It is only in connection with the keeping of the law that God demands what mankind is incapable of providing. Never in connection with the Gospel. This tells us that Nicodemus was, in fact, capable of understanding. The word that God

the Holy Spirit used in our text, which is translated “understand,” refers to the acceptance of something as true. To “understand” therefore means that we accept whatever God tells us in his Word as true. In our text, Jesus was teaching Nicodemus how one must not only be physically born to have eternal life, he must also be spiritually reborn. While our mothers provide the first, only the Holy Spirit can provide the second. Jesus said much the same to other Jewish leaders: ***Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.*** ^{ESV}([John 8:43](#))

God’s truth is not beyond our ability to understand. The problem is not that God’s truth is incomprehensible, it is that man’s intellect resists such divine truth. The same is true with God’s revealed truth concerning his triune nature. By the Holy Spirit’s working in our hearts, we absolutely can understand the truth that we have one God, who manifests himself in three separate and distinct persons. Again, the problem is not that we cannot *understand* such truth, but rather that this divine truth conflicts with our limited human reason.

All of this helps to explain how human reason, when used *improperly*, can be a damning curse; but when rightly used can be one of the most beautiful, glorious and excellent gifts of God. Our text gives examples of both the right and wrong use of human reason. The right or correct use is to listen to our God and to accept as true whatever he tells us. The improper use is to allow our human reason to sit in judgment over what God tells us in his Word.

Jesus taught us this in our text when he said that which was actually completely contrary to human reason – but that is precisely the lesson both we and Nicodemus needed to learn. When it comes to the truth of God’s Word, there logic and reason very often become our enemies. There is no more important lesson, since natural human reason leads relentlessly to eternal destruction. On the contrary, Jesus promised us: ***“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”***

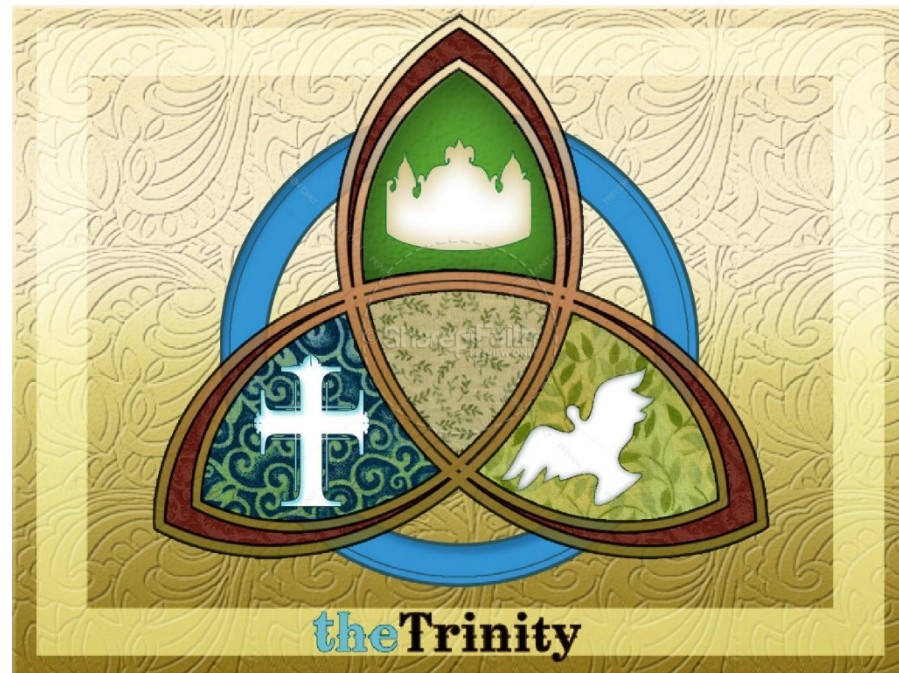
When it comes to divine truth, the world universally reacts with the response of Nicodemus: ***“How can this be?”*** Do not be afraid, giving all glory to God alone, to respond as did Jesus: ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know.”*** We understand and believe what we do because the Triune God has worked a miraculous change in us. He has created saving faith in our hearts. *He* did that, not us. We were just as lost and befuddled as was Nicodemus. God the Holy Spirit changed us when he saved us. The result is that, abandoning our faulty human reasoning,

we truly do now understand and believe sublime truths that transcend human invention – chief of which is the fact that Jesus our Savior has paid for every single one of our sins on the cross of Calvary. God grant us continued confidence in ***“what we know.”*** Amen.

^{ESV} **Isaiah 6:1-8** In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" ⁶ ¶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." ⁸ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."

^{ESV} **Acts 2:14a, 22-36** But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: ²² ¶ "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know-- ²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. ²⁵ For David says concerning him, "I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; ²⁶ therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. ²⁷ For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. ²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence." ²⁹ ¶ "Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹ he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. ³² This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. ³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. ³⁴ For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, ³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool." ³⁶ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

^{ESV} **John 3:1-17** Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² 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." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ 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?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ 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." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ 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. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ ¶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ 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."



ST PAUL LUTHERAN CHURCH

BISMARCK, NORTH DAKOTA

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

2510 E. Divide Ave. Bismarck, ND 58501

Parsonage and Office: (701) 223-4885 Cell: (701) 425-5483

Website: www.bismarcklutheran.org

Mark Johnson, President Angela Pfennig, Organist
Michael Roehl, Pastor

Trinity Sunday – May 30, 2021

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 743 (Brown Hymnal)

"Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Isaiah 6:1-8) This morning is Trinity Sunday. On this day we focus first on the majesty and holiness of our God. The reaction of Isaiah in this reading, upon finding himself in the presence of even a partial manifestation of the God of heaven and earth, is both natural and commendable. All creation ought to so honor and revere God. Note here too how the triune nature of our God is expressed in the angel's three-fold "**Holy, Holy, Holy.**"

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 45 (Supplement page 32)

The Second Lesson: (Acts 2:14a, 22-36) Trinity Sunday follows Pentecost Sunday. In this reading we find evidence of the greatest of the Pentecost gifts: spiritual wisdom, understanding, and insight – as well as courage to share those truths with the world. We also note on this Trinity Sunday how once again all three persons of the Godhead are here mentioned, which again validates our belief in the Triune nature or character of our God. We should never be ashamed of confessing what God's Word teaches, even when we cannot fully comprehend such divine truth.

The Confession of Faith -

Based on the Athanasian Creed (See Insert)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 246 (Red Hymnal)

"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty"

The Sermon – John 3:1-17 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 245 (Stanzas 1-4, 6) (Red Hymnal)

"God Loved the World So that He Gave"

The Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 239 (Red Hymnal)

"Come, Thou Almighty King"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States and around the world. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (28) Average (32)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Wednesday	- 6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
Next Sunday	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor Sam Rodebaugh is considering the call to Redeemer of Cheyenne. Pastor Caleb Schaller has returned the call to Redeemer of Sister Lakes, MI. That congregation has now called Pastor Mark Tiefel. Pastor Chad Seybt has accepted the call to St. Paul's of Melrose, WI. Grace School of Valentine has called Sara Gurath, a former teacher who is now a member of Gift of God, Mapleton.

Summer Schedule – We have entered our summer schedule, which continues through Labor Day.

Confirmation Classes – Confirmation parents and students please see Pastor Roehl after the service this morning for the upcoming schedule, tentatively scheduled for 6pm on Wednesday.

Lutheran Spokesman and Daily Rest – Subscriptions for both the Lutheran Spokesman and Daily Rest need to be renewed. Please see the sheet on the mailbox table.

Upcoming Summer Events – The CLC Women's Retreat West is scheduled for September 17-19 in Chadron, NE. Information pamphlets are available on the mailbox table. Those interested in the class being offered by Phil Pfennig, please check the sign-up sheet, also on the mailbox table.

Summer Church Projects – A list of projects around the church that need to be completed this summer is being prepared by Trustee Coordinator Brian Fettig. Please let him know if you see something that needs attention.