

# “A Spirit of Freedom”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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## **John 3:1-7**

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘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.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.”’*

## **Romans 8:12-17**

*So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear; but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit and pray that you would take all that we would have within - our thoughts, our words, the worries, the joys. I pray that you would take the words that we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've read from Scripture, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these into the living Word of Jesus Christ and let that Word do its work within us, among us, and through us. Let that Word be a comfort to us in our troubles, encouragement to us in our doubts. Let it challenge us where we are too proud. Let it invite us to serve you and to serve and love our neighbors. Most of all, let that Word feed us this day so that we might know that we are your people, your body, your hands, and your feet and that each of us are called to serve and to love. We ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

On this Trinity Sunday, we take one Sunday of the year, usually a Sunday when we hope most people are not in church, [laughter] oh, sorry, except the stalwarts, and we consider one of the most complex realities that we, as Christians, proclaim. That God is three and God is one. A Trinity. A triune community, if you will. And as Bill and I were chatting about as we came down the stairs to come to worship, we noticed that on the front of the bulletin, it says the first Sunday after Pentecost rather than Trinity Sunday. Neither of us had realized that there was such a thing as the first Sunday after Pentecost. It's the first time in all of our years of doing ministry we've encountered that title. And he said to me, "Well, good. At least you don't have to preach on the Trinity." [laughter] I wish.

Earlier this week, I found myself suffering for the Lord at Pappy's. Every other month, I get together with the ministers of the largest churches in our presbytery, along with our presbytery leader, and we go out to lunch. I've been in this presbytery now almost 11 years and for every luncheon before this last one, we met at

Cardwell's in Frontenac because it was the central location. But one of the younger members of the group, someone who I will not name, decided that rather than going to Cardwell's, he wanted to go to Pappy's and try something new. I am ashamed to admit that I had never been to Pappy's before. I had heard stories of lines around the block. The best barbecue joint in St. Louis. It even has a guard station on the corner in order to keep the people in check as they line up, trying to get the last of what was described to me as the most heavenly thing on earth - burnt ends. So I got there expecting to stand in line and suffer and was surprised that there was no one in line. When I ordered the burnt ends, the cashier did not pause and tell me that they were gone but said, "What else would you like for your sides?" We ordered, we sat down, and we began to have a conversation.

The conversation that we had was about how the median pastor in our presbytery, the typical pastor in our presbytery, stands at his or her pulpit on a Sunday and looks out and preaches to 40 people. And the conversation was all about how do we help small churches grow? How do we help churches stay alive that have 8, 10, 12 members? How do we get them to be thriving? How do we get them to have leadership that's engaged and on and on it went. And about 40 minutes into it, after about 55 bites of burnt ends and the oohing and aahing was done, I finally asked, "Wait a second. What about the larger churches? The ones that we all minister. What do we need to be paying attention to?" And the conversation shifted. And we ended up talking about discovering our gifts and our treasures, becoming self-aware of who we are and what we are and what we have to offer; what it is that makes us unique. And I shared that one of the things that I was concerned about was that we, as a church family, are getting a lot of new members who are young, married folks with small children, some of them infants. And that we're going to have to start new small groups and we're going to have to pay attention to childcare on Sunday because it might need to be bumped up and all these things. And the executive presbyter of our presbytery looked at me and said, "Ah, you're Kirkwood. You're special. Just be quiet." [laughter]

Okay. But then he went back to his office after lunch and he wrote a blog post. In it, he talked about how we, as Presbyterians, are special. That we're called and loved by God, that we're different than Methodists and Baptists, and that we need to kind of do our thing. He did a very poor job of capturing the conversation that we had at lunch about discovering our treasures. In fact, it was such a--what you might call not a great job that one of our very own, Dick Stoll, responded to his post and said, "I thought we were taught to love everyone and to respect our differences." So Dick, to you I say, "Amen." That was the essence of our conversation, even though it was poorly captured in a blog. The conversation was about how each church, not just in our presbytery, but each church in our community, needs to understand what God has gifted them with. And how we might be a place that honors those gifts rather than trying to be everything to everybody.

If you're ever with a group of ministers or church elders who are concerned about their churches, the one thing that you will hear over and over and over again, even though it's never said out loud, is that in order to be okay, you need to be something different than what you are right now. You need to have more screens in your sanctuary. You need to have a different style of music. You need to get rid of pews and put in bean bag chairs. You chuckle, but the church named Webster Groves Presbyterian has bean bag chairs in their sanctuary in order for the children to have a place to hang out and be comfortable. It's not a bad idea. It's just probably not who we are.

I was thinking about this idea that we all need to discover our gifts, our treasures, and be self-aware. And as I thought about that, the image or the words that came to me was that we need to be a thriving ecosystem of faith. Kirkwood is a better community when the Methodists are thriving and the Baptists are thriving and the AME churches are thriving and the Presbyterians are thriving. We, as a community, when the Lutherans and

the Roman Catholics are thriving, when the Jewish members of our community are thriving, we are a better place. We're a better community. And I believe it makes us more alive. And to me, this idea of an ecosystem of faith then taps into the idea of the Trinity. This idea of where a community of distinct and diverse identities and treasures and gifts thrives because each one is making a contribution to the other. God the Creator, Jesus the Redeemer, and the Spirit which sustains us all. Each member of the Trinity having a distinct role, gift, and purpose and yet each doing what they do for the benefit of the other. And really not even just the benefit of the other but for the benefit of others.

How is it that we can trust and honor the fact and live out the reality of God the Creator, Jesus the Redeemer, and the Spirit, the sustainer, within each of us? And as I was thinking about that idea, what came to me was maybe not so much a sermon but a little bit of a Bible study. Three short verses that capture, in a very brief amount of words, the essence of what it means to trust in a triune God. God the Creator from Genesis 2. In that day, the Lord God made the heaven and earth where no plants of the field were yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up. For the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth and there was no one to till the ground. Yet a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground. Then the Lord God formed humankind from the dust of the ground and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life. And humanity became a living thing. We are dust of the earth and breath of God. Each of us right now. Holy and sacred because the breath we breathe is from God. And not just us who believe, but all people. God the Creator.

And then Larry read the most famous passage about Christ the Redeemer. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. It is the faithfulness of Jesus Christ that forgives us our sins. It is the faithfulness of Jesus Christ that ensures that we are welcome to this table. It is the faithfulness of Jesus Christ that invites us here to worship this day and every Sunday. Christ the Redeemer, for each of us. And then the sustainer, the Spirit. Also from the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you, but the advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid." Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.

I think about every conversation I had with my children when they were worried or concerned or upset or afraid. And I imagine myself sitting calmly and when they had finished, often in tears, saying simply, peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. I do not give hurt or deceit or heartbreak. I do not give fear or feeling left out. I do not give exclusion. I do not give bullying or fighting or hard words. I give you peace. So do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid. On this day, Trinity Sunday, we take a timeout to remember God's goodness for each of us. God the Creator that gives each of us life through the breath that we breathe. Christ the Redeemer who saves us from our sin and includes us in God's household. And the Holy Spirit which resides within each of us. That offers us peace. The kind of peace that reassures all of us so that we might never, ever be afraid.

Brothers and sisters, I know that this is not Pappy's, but we are soon to celebrate the feast of our Lord. A time when we are open to the gifts and spirit that God has for each of us. So let us come to this table and be open this day to be fed and nurtured and sustained by the grace, peace, and love of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.