

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today in our Gospel lesson, we have a law, Gospel tension happening between Jesus and Nicodemus and we can throw a little Donovan into the mix as well. This name Donovan ought to bring out the old hippie in us. For those who may not know who Donovan is, he is a Scottish musician, singer-songwriter who emerged from the British folk scene in 1965. Donovan wrote a lovely song entitled "Catch the Wind." The song is about a relationship that one wanted that one couldn't have and the verses close with this wonderful hook:

"Ah, but I may as well try and catch the wind."

It was used in a TV commercial for GE concerning wind energy a few years ago. The song may have been mistaken for a Bob Dylan song because it has that early Dylan sound. But herein lies the problem with the Gospel that Jesus points out to Nicodemus. Nicodemus thinks God can be encapsulated or even obtained through the Law, but Jesus graciously teaches him that, God like the wind cannot be caught because the wind blows where it chooses, we only hear the sound of it but we don't know from where it comes from or where it goes...nor can we control it or catch it.

And like the grace of the Gospel, we do not obtain it or catch it through the Law. Grace is a pure gift that is given through the death of Jesus Christ. Of course, we also have this very familiar and well-known passage that only needs to be introduced by saying, John 3:16. And with that reference comes,

¹⁶ 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

But as I have said so many times, those quoting this passage almost use it like a weapon and totally forget about the following verse,

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

The Law or rather, the Ten Commandments, point out our sin and condemns us but we are not left there in that condemnation, the Law does something that so many forget...it drives us toward the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ who is the assurance of our forgiveness. Nonetheless, when this passage from John's Gospel is invoked, it is usually followed up with the questions, "Are you born again?" Or, "have you been saved?" Or, "have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" We hang on these questions because we feel if we can convict someone with these questions, then the Law is going to condemn them find favor with the one asking the questions and then by the Law the one asking will be saved...by pointing out the faults of the others. Likewise, in the darkened quagmire of the legalism of these types of questions about faith is where Nicodemus comes from and approaches Jesus today in our Gospel lesson.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee who is a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a Jewish legislative and judicial assembly of 71 judges that made up a supreme court who legislatively acted on God's Law known as Mosaic Law. They were at that time the ultimate authority on Mosaic Law. So, for Nicodemus, he knew the Law, followed it to the letter, and understood God and the benefits of God to be something one could earn through following the letter of the Law. One could say that Nicodemus' understanding of salvation or his perspective of the kingdom of God is

something that one could decide to do by following the letter of the Law. If I do thus and such, then God will reward me because I followed the Law. And let's face it, if we are totally honest there is a hint of this puritanical understanding that remains in our faith today. There are many of "good" Christians that believe that faith and salvation in Jesus Christ is something that we ourselves decide upon, we control, we earn, and understand it as a program that we follow, something that we think or believe according to the paradigms we have formulated about the Law. But Jesus reminds Nicodemus and reminds us as well, that faith, like our birth is something that is done *for* us rather than *by* us. We do not decide to be born nor do we choose or decide our faith, the grace of God given, or the forgiveness of our sins, it is given by God and even our faith to believe this is given because we cannot come to this understanding on our own. Jesus reiterates this by referring to the mystery of the wind:

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

Nor can God's grace, mercy, and salvation be confined by human concepts or deeds...it goes where *God* chooses. It is all a pure gift of grace given by God through Jesus Christ. This is the Law-Gospel tension that some have difficulty with. In our Lutheran Confessions, Law and Gospel are clearly two distinguishable concepts, but at the same time they are deeply interrelated. This Law is what the Sanhedrin know and very piously follow, it is what Nicodemus represents when he says to Jesus:

"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."

Nicodemus cannot think beyond the confines of the Law. In his mind, he cannot understand how anyone can be born again. He cannot see it as a new way of thinking about the Law. Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness to confront Jesus, but we don't really know if he is threatened by the teachings of Jesus or curious about them. The darkness in this Gospel of John can represent either unbelief or separation from God. But Jesus does not turn Nicodemus away or rebuke him, Jesus invites him to come and see for himself. What Jesus actually says in the Greek is that he invites Nicodemus to come and abide with God. With this said, I believe the darkness is saying more about Nicodemus' understanding of God and that the Law that he is so familiar with is no longer a Law that condemns, but a Law that reveals to us our sin...it is a Law that drives us to the Gospel...just as Nicodemus' darkened understanding of the Law drives him to the light of Jesus.

But can this encounter with Jesus give birth to a new way of thinking after he has become old and stuck in his ways? Can he birth a new way of thinking? Nicodemus is both powerful and an educated leader, he is one of those people who have much success in striving, and planning, and setting goals and working for what he wants in life. He has followed all the Jewish laws and has ruled on those who have not. Nicodemus thinks that all he has to do is to find out Jesus' program, get familiar with it, master it, and then he will be "saved." I suspect that Nicodemus is asking that very familiar question I think we all ask at times...*what must I do?*

Like Nicodemus, we all struggle with thinking that we EARN God's love, God's grace, God's mercy, and salvation. But also, like Nicodemus this is where our OLD familiar ways need to be brought to the light and born anew. Or perhaps a better understanding of Law and Gospel would

help us...after all, it is part of our confession as Lutherans. Article IV, concerning justification in the Latin translation of the Augsburg Confession reminds us as Lutherans:

Likewise, they teach that human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works. But they are justified as a gift on account of Christ through faith when they believe that they are received into grace and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. God reckons this faith as righteousness.¹

This article is undergirded with St. Paul's letter to the Church in Rome:

²¹ But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴ they are now justified by [God's] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

(Romans 3:21-26)

For us, it seems that the Law, the Ten Commandments are easy to understand, they all add up for us very neatly. They are concise, do this or do that. But the problem is that we cannot do any of them properly. And even if we could, first and foremost we would not need Jesus, His death would be in vain...secondly, Jesus has already fulfilled the Law. Nonetheless, we get the Law...we understand the Laws...but we do not get grace because grace does not add up like the law for us. But God's Law does NOT condemn us, it simply reveals our sin to us and drives us to the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ...and that doesn't always add up for us because there are people who we feel are underserving of God's grace and mercy. This is what God has given to us and this is what Jesus is attempting to teach this curious Pharisee named Nicodemus who has like each of us, come to Jesus for the reality of the Good News.

Unfortunately, we have convinced ourselves that we can GET God's love by our own arbitrary way and in turn we can climb into God's heart and God's eternal kingdom by our own familiar, self-invented path or ladder. When preaching on this particular Gospel text, Luther proclaimed this:

We (are) so drowned in the stupor of our own good works that we do not see and understand these words. But if you want to find God, then inscribe these words on your heart. Don't sleep, but be vigilant. Learn and ponder these words diligently: ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he GAVE his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Let (all) who can write, write these words. Furthermore, read them, discuss them, meditate and reflect on them in the morning and in the evening, whether awake or asleep!²

Listen again to these very familiar words of St. John:

¹ Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. The Augsburg Confession – Latin Text – Article IV: Justification, pages 39, 41, par 1-3.

² Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Luther's Works Volume 22, Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1-4*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957. Page 368

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he *gave* his only Son, so that everyone who *believes* in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

There is one word in here that greatly challenges us all, "GAVE." It doesn't say that God WILL GIVE, it says that God GAVE and the tense of that verb in the Greek is in a case that does not translate into English but means that God GAVE His only begotten Son one time but the action of that giving continues to this day and will continue through the ages. God *gave* His Son! We certainly didn't earn Him...God GAVE him. This verb gave is the same tense as the word "gave" within the Words of Institution when Jesus takes bread and wine, blesses them, and gave them.

I pray that our faith would this day move us all beyond our familiar ways that have darkened and may have closed our hearts and our minds to consider NOT only the grace and life freely GIVEN in Jesus Christ but also the magnificent way in which it is GIVEN. May our faith be reborn through this Holy Word and in this Holy Meal. May we taste the free gift given to us in Jesus Christ...taste the forgiveness and life in this bread and wine. May our reborn faith open our hearts and our minds to see that we are not condemned; we have been saved by the grace and love that God GAVE to us in Jesus Christ. May our reborn faith in our times of struggle and challenge direct our hearts and our eyes to the hills where we know our help will come from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. Through our faith we know that God will not let our foot be moved and that God watches over us. For God so loves us that He GAVE His only Son Jesus Christ to preserve us from all evil; and we know that it is our Lord Jesus Christ who shall keep us safe from this time forth forevermore.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.