

"Guilt"

Text: John 3:1-17

Grace and peace be yours in the name of our Savior God. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

There's a saying that *"newer is not always better."* Advertisers get that, which is probably why they don't just tell us a product is *"new,"* but *"new and improved."* While it's true that newer is not always better, the implication is also true – which is that newer is better most of the time. That's not to say the original was necessarily bad, but there aren't many things in this world that can't be improved.

The confession of sins we use in our "new" page 12 Supplement liturgy comes to mind. Not only does it preserve what was good in the previous confession, it added an element that was lacking – the disposition of guilt. The confession from page 5 of the Lutheran Hymnal includes a confession of both original sin and sins of action, but it does not address guilt, which is a shame. The "page 12 liturgy" addresses both. In it we confess both our original sin (the sin with which all of us are born) and our sins of action (sins we actually commit). Here are the specific words: *"Merciful Father in heaven, I am altogether sinful from birth..."* That's original sin. That's our confession that we are born sinful and therefore spiritually unclean and in need of forgiveness from birth. The confession goes on: *"In countless ways I have sinned against You and do not deserve to be called Your child."* That's our confession that we were not only born with sin, we have also done what we shouldn't and have failed to do what we should. The confession then goes on: *"Cleanse me from my sin, and take away my guilt."*

Guilt is real, and guilt can be crippling. It can also, however, serve as an extremely effective tool when used properly and kept in its place. Those that don't know Jesus Christ should be riddled with the stuff. Christians, on the other hand, should have none of it. Our text for this morning will help to explain. The text that will guide us to a better understanding of guilt is found in that well-known 3rd Chapter of John's Gospel:

^{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 revealed Word and will of our God. With complete confidence that these are in fact the verbally inspired words of our God, his revealed word and will for our lives, so we pray: **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

Familiarity does not always and only breed contempt; it can also breed understanding – even if that understanding means grasping how different are the thoughts and gifts of another human being. That's not necessarily a bad thing. In fact it ought to cause us to thank our God that he didn't make us all the same; that he didn't give us all the same gifts and interests. He made every human being different with the intended result that we could function not only as a society but as members of the body of Christ. I've met a bona fide genius or two, and for the most part they couldn't tie their own shoes without a flow chart and personal attendants. You and I, on the other hand, probably won't make any major contributions in the areas of nuclear physics or quantum theory, but we *can* manage our own shoe tying obligations.

The point this morning is that Nicodemus, a man who walked comfortably among the elite of Jewish society in Jesus' day, found himself immediately and hopelessly out of his league and over his head when he met with Jesus – the event described in our text. Nicodemus came from a world where everything probably made sense to his rational human intellect –

including his general views on religion. In fact, although we cannot know for certain, he probably came to Jesus because something about Jesus conflicted with his sense of logic. He alluded to his problem in the opening verse of our text: **"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."**

See the problem? The Jews, and in particular their religious leaders, wanted to condemn Jesus as a false prophet because of his new and strange teachings, yet they were troubled by a logical inconsistency: *How could a false prophet perform such extraordinary signs without the power of God working in and through him? And if the power of God was working in and through this man, how could he possibly be a false prophet?*

This was, in fact, the very reason that God the Father worked those miracles through his Son – to create, at the very least, a logical inconsistency for those who encountered Jesus. Repeatedly Jesus pleaded with the Jews: **"Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves."** (John 14:11) So it is that we find Nicodemus slinking from the darkness of his own logical uncertainties and emerging into the light of that One who came to bring the light of understanding into our dark, falsely logical world. Remember how John, earlier in this same Book, described Jesus as **"the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world."** He went on to observe, **"He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him."**

Nicodemus had no idea who Jesus really was, and his conversation with the Son of God demonstrated that he was clearly out of his league and in over his head. He was a member in good standing with the Jewish elite, but when it came to the truths Jesus was teaching he was obviously absolutely lost and ignorant. The result was that he said some things that were every bit as silly as anything I would try to contribute to a discussion on quantum physics. Nicodemus began with, **"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"** and ended with the rather pathetic, **"How can these things be?"**

The point here is that Nicodemus was thinking *logically*, and his human logic *failed him miserably* when he tried to use his rational human logic to understand Jesus Christ and the Christian faith.

Permit an example by way of illustration. Have you ever ridden a horse as part of an established trail ride? You quickly find that the horses know a good bit more than you do about where you are going. I went on one when I was fairly young, and I recall the guide telling us not to worry about trying to "steer the horse" because he knows where he is going. That is exactly how man naturally regards his own logic or reason. Reason is his horse, and he assumes it will get him where he wants to go if he will just give it free reign

and allow himself to be led or carried along by it. When it comes to Christianity, just the opposite is true. Nicodemus rode into Jesus' presence on the horse of his own reason. As such he assumed that his own reason would instinctively know the path to heaven. Jesus, on the other hand, knew that if this man didn't somehow get knocked off of the rational horse he rode in on, his logical assumptions would carry him straight to hell. Worse still, man's natural logic *always* gives the impression that it knows what it's doing; that it knows the right way and is absolutely certain that it is on the right path. Again, the only possible destination, given that sort of reasoning, is always and only the gates of hell.

So it was that Jesus in our text threw Nicodemus' world into logical turmoil. He did this by first speaking in words that could not be understood by a non-Christian, and then concluded with words that could not be *misunderstood*. So it was that while Nicodemus just didn't get the spiritual concept of being born again and raised up like the bronze serpent in the wilderness, he could not possibly miss the intended meaning of that great gospel promise in verses 16 and 17. There he was taught the logical inconsistency that is Christianity: a human being is not saved by what he himself does, but through faith in what another (Jesus Christ) has done for him.

That is not to say that understanding the Savior's words was the same as coming to saving faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit, never a rational decision made by man based on facts and logical conclusions. Among many other Bible verses, our New Testament reading for this morning from Romans 5:1-8 establishes this fact.) By God's grace we are later given an indication that such saving faith may well have been created in Nicodemus, for he later not only defended Jesus in the Sanhedrin (John 7:50 ff.) he also openly cared for the Savior's body following the crucifixion (John 19:39 ff.) Handling a dead body on Good Friday, by the way, would have rendered Nicodemus ceremonially unclean and therefore unable to celebrate the Passover on the Saturday after Good Friday. It is, at the very least, a very good sign that he was willing to give up that which had once been so important to him, having finally found his "pearl of great price."

So much for Nicodemus. What does any of this have to do with you and me, and what does this have to do with guilt? Much in every way. You and I not only live in a world where logic and the rational reign supreme, that logic is also the primary source of our guilt. There will always be a temptation, throughout our time of grace on earth, to try to force our beliefs to conform to our human standards of logic and reason. We experience this phenomenon every time a scientist cites "evidence" for evolution, or "genetic justification" for sins like homosexuality. There will always be a part of us that wants to conform to the world's standards and longs to be accepted by our society. Even worse, we are continually plagued by our

sense of fair play in connection with sin. Damning reason will always tell us that a human being can only make up for evil by doing good; that he can only make himself lovable to God by living a certain way or fulfilling some code of conduct. How difficult, as Luther put it, to *"pluck out the eyes of our reason"* whenever that reason stands in opposition to Biblical truth. Then, when we fail to live up to God's standard consistently, guilt is the inevitable result.

Nicodemus, like virtually all who hold to a "salvation by works" religion, must have been absolutely shot through with guilt. It would take some incredible mental gymnastics and some serious delusional thought to arrive at the conclusion that he, Nicodemus, had kept God's commandments perfectly – that he had measured up to the standard of perfection that the Law demands.

Jesus warned that ***"unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."*** (Matthew 5:20) The only sort of righteousness that exceeds the civic goodness of the religious leaders of Jesus' day (which outwardly was undoubtedly flawless) is the righteousness supplied to us by Jesus Christ. The Christian faith is therefore based on the completely illogical teaching that God punished his Son in our stead - ***"visiting on Him the iniquity of us all"*** (as the Prophet Isaiah put it.) The result was the even more irrational truth that a human being is seen by God as absolutely sinless when saving faith is present in his heart – faith that despairs of our own goodness and trusts instead in the goodness of Jesus as our sin payment.

This is the one path to heaven, but be warned that this divine gospel truth will very likely never *feel* quite right to our natural sense of logic and fair play. Why would God the Father punish his own Son for what his Son did not do? Why would he then turn around and reward *me* with what I have in no way earned? This, however, is the simple, irrational glory of the gospel itself. It is the key – the one key – to eternal life, summed up by Jesus himself in our text: ***"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."***

Doubt it not because it makes no sense to your sin-addled human intellect. Rejoice instead in the unimaginable gift of life eternal that you have been given. Is it logical? Never – and thanks be to God that it is not. Logical and rational would have rightly called for eternal death in hell for every single sinner. Logical and rational would have required that we spend an entire lifetime trying to do what we nonetheless were and are powerless to accomplish. Let this truth also be the antidote to your own personal guilt. If there is one thing that is consistent in every Christian it is our failure to live up to God's perfect standard in any way. We sin daily, and often. The fact remains, as we are reminded in our Supplement liturgy confession, God the Father not only placed upon his Son all of our sins, he has also *"removed our*

guilt forever." Christians can and should therefore approach the throne of our Heavenly Father free of all guilt – not because we have in any way measured up to the demands of his holy law, but because his Son did exactly that - in our place and as our substitute. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we now exist – every moment of every day that faith is present in our hearts – absolutely free of all sin. And where there is no sin, there is no reason for guilt.

This is the amazing truth of the gospel. Jesus Christ, by his perfect life and innocent death, has removed both our sin and our guilt. We really are now, in the view of our God, as perfect as was his Son, for God himself has declared that he now regards the faith he himself created in us to be the equivalent of perfection. Faith is now credited as righteousness. Your sins are gone. Let your guilt be gone with it. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Exodus 17:1-7** All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ And the LORD said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

^{ESV} **Romans 5:1-8** Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. ⁶ ¶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die-- ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

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The Third Sunday in Lent – March 19, 2017

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 148 (Stanzas 1-6) (Red Hymnal)

"Lord Jesus Christ, My Life My Light"

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

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

The Old Testament Lesson: (Exodus 17:1-7) Our physical needs often short circuit our understanding of our spiritual needs. This was demonstrated clearly in the events of our first lesson this morning, where the Israelites were willing to sacrifice their ethics and morality because of their thirst. We today need to learn the same lesson. Never underestimate God's power to provide for all of our needs, and, while trusting him, walk in faith and confidence in the Lord.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 85 (Page 40)

The New Testament Lesson: (Romans 5:1-8) Definitions matter. We define "grace" as "God's undeserved love for sinners." The word "undeserved" is key. We were declared to be righteous by God long before we had been brought to faith – long before we were ever born. God declared the entire world's sin debt to have been paid in full when Christ died on the cross. How could we ever imagine that we could in any way earn that which was *given* to us two thousand years before we were even born? This is the truth that gives us true and lasting peace.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 457 (Red Hymnal)

"What a Friend We Have in Jesus"

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

"Guilt"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 436 (Red Hymnal)

"The Lord's My Shepherd"

The Offering

The Prayers followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Closing Hymn - 52 (Red Hymnal)

"Almighty Father Bless the Word"

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, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. 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 (38) Ave (42) Wednesday (21)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship/Coffee Time
Wednesday	-5:30 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Lenten Service
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship/Coffee Time

CLC News – Pastor Nathan Pfeiffer has returned the call to Immanuel of Winter Haven. Pastor David Reim has returned the call to St. Luke's of Lemmon. Claire Abbas has returned two calls: Messiah Lutheran, Hales Corners WI, and Redeemer Lutheran, Cheyenne WY.

Church Council Notes – All Council members, plus the Pastor, attended the March 12 meeting. At their request, the membership of Travis, Felicia, Neka, Madison, and Noah Watson was transferred to Berea of Sioux Falls. The wireless router that serves the church and parsonage was replaced. The Council approved the concept of reconfiguring the kitchen cabinets and are awaiting final plans from the Women's Fellowship. The Annual Men's Breakfast was approved for Easter morning. The Council discussed the advisability of locking the entry doors of the church during the worship service. The next Council meeting is scheduled for April 9 and the Quarterly Voters' meeting for May 7.

Thank You – Thanks to all who helped with food and housing for last night's beautiful, uplifting ILC Tour Choir concert.

CLC Women's Retreat – A reminder that at least one vehicle from Bismarck will travel to the ILC Women's Retreat in April. Please contact Sandy or Carolyn if you would like to attend and need a ride.