

Everyone take your finger and touch your faith. Faith, not face. No, not your heart, your faith. How about this, touch your spiritual life that you have in Christ Jesus. You can't do it, can you? You can touch your physical life, your physical body. But how do we touch our spiritual life?

We may be about as confused as Nicodemus in our text. He understood the physical realm; physical birth, physical life. But that is where his understanding stopped. He had no concept of spiritual birth and spiritual life. But are we masters of wisdom in this area? If we can't even put our finger on it, how are we able to fully understand it?

*"Unless one is born again,"* says Jesus, *"he cannot see the kingdom of God."* Birth, being born. Now that is something Nicodemus can understand. It's something physical, of the flesh. Something he can touch and grasp.

And so, we can understand his confusion when Jesus speaks about a second birth. And we can picture his jaw dropping as he utters the word: *"How!"* Nicodemus is trying to picture a grown man, maybe even himself, climbing back into his mother's womb and being born again. And this is how one enters the kingdom of God? Might as well pull a camel through the eye of a needle. They are both physically impossible.

Two weeks ago I baptized our grandson in Ohio. Eight days before this he was born into the world. He had physical life. Did he understand the physical life God had given him? No. He nursed, he pooped, he slept. All physical things. But he had no understanding of these things. Did he have to understand the physical realm in order to be born into it? Of course not. Birth comes first. Understanding comes later.

What is true of the physical is true of the spiritual. They are both births, being born. Our first birth places us into the physical world. Our second birth brings us into the kingdom of God. Tristan had no understanding of the physical realm. And yet he was born into that realm anyway. He had no concept of God's spiritual kingdom. And yet, two weeks ago, he was born again, born into the kingdom of grace despite his lack of understanding. The understanding will come as he is taught.

The beautiful thing about birth is that God does it, making it His miracle. And He does it with, or without, our understanding. Both physical birth and spiritual birth. We are passive. God is the one who acts.

Looking at Nicodemus, he was stuck in the physical realm. He could only see the concept of being born in a physical way, as a physical birth. Jesus had to move him from the physical to the spiritual. From the earthly to the heavenly. From our natural birth to Holy Baptism.

Now even though we see water with our eyes and hear Jesus' words with our ears, baptism is spiritual. It is a real birth. But we can't put our finger on it. We feel the water and hear the words, but we cannot touch the faith and the spiritual life we are given in baptism.

And yet it's real. Can you put your finger out and touch God? And yet He is real. Do you understand God – how He is three, and yet He is one? We confess that God is triune, but we do not understand it. We are baptized, born into this confession and faith. The understanding will come later in heaven.

As human beings, we do not doubt the truth that we live in a physical world. We can see it, and hear it, and touch it. We don't need faith to live as physical beings. We just need to employ our senses. But we do need faith to live in the kingdom of God. And here doubts can arise in our hearts. "Where is my faith? Do I even have faith? I can't put my finger on it. What if I don't have faith?"

God does not leave us to our doubts. He acts to give us assurance. You are alive in this world because you were born into it. You remain a living, physical being because you nourish your body with what it needs: the air you breathe, the food you eat, the water you drink.

Friend, in the same way, you have the assurance that you are a member of God's kingdom of grace because in your baptism you were born into it. And you remain in His spiritual kingdom of grace because you are nourished with the food of life: the preaching of Jesus' words and His Sacrament on the altar; and the air that you breathe in His kingdom of grace is the air of forgiveness.

God gives us Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, Holy Absolution – the Holy Gospel – to bring us into His kingdom, to keep us in His kingdom, and to assure us that we are members of His kingdom of grace. If we have doubts, the Gospel is greater than our doubts. And it declares with certainty that Christ died on the cross for everyone who is conceived and born into this physical world.

Now sometimes we think like Nicodemus. We grab hold of the physical, but lose sight of the spiritual. We get so wrapped up in what we see, taste, touch, and hear that we fail to live by faith. We celebrate our physical birth into the world, but we forget our birth in Holy Baptism, and we neglect the holy means of grace God gives us to assure us of our place in His kingdom, and to keep us forever in His kingdom.

Do not ever neglect these holy things – His Gospel. And we must repent of our neglect in the past. And then remember that the air you breathe in God's spiritual kingdom is the air of forgiveness. It is the breath of Jesus as He hung and died upon the cross. His word of pardon for you. And in this word, God assures you that you are forgiven, that all your sins are forgiven, that you are part of His kingdom, and that your baptism into Christ never leaves you.

And if you want to reach out and put your finger on something for more assurance, then do this: put your finger on your forehead, move it down to your heart, then move your finger across your heart. Touch your physical body and believe the good news that for this sinful body Jesus died and rose again. And even more, this person that your finger is touching is born again by Holy Baptism into God's kingdom of grace. Amen.