

Trinity Sunday
May 27, 2018
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Isaiah 6:1-8
Canticle 13: *Benedictus es, Domine*
Romans 8:12-17
John 3:1-17

Today is the Feast of the Holy Trinity, Trinity Sunday. And since we are Trinity Episcopal Church, that makes this our congregation's feast day. We should probably make a big deal of the occasion and I should probably preach about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity today.

But there are a couple of reasons not to. First, I know enough to know that it's pretty easy to step into one of the ancient heresies about the Trinity: Modalism or Tritheism or Arianism or Docetism, to name just a few. ⁱ I know enough to know how easy it is to step into one of the heresies, but I'm not at all sure I know enough to avoid doing so. And I'm pretty well persuaded that anyone who claims to be an expert, who says they understand the Trinity, is someone not to be trusted.

At the end of the day, I'm less interested in the trying to define the doctrine, or make sense of it, in any event; I'm more interested in trying to get at the experience behind the dogma and asking what difference any of this makes in how we live our lives today.

And so I am drawn into this morning's gospel. Nicodemus comes to Jesus as one of those people who thinks he already has a pretty good understanding of things theological. He's described as a leader. Jesus refers to him as a "teacher of Israel." He begins by reassuring Jesus that he "knows" a thing or two about how God works ... about God is working in Jesus himself.

But Jesus interrupts Nicodemus there. He tells Nicodemus something that begins to undo his certainty right there at the start. No one can see anything clearly about God and what God is doing in this world, Jesus tells him, without "being born from above."

And if Jesus is trying to rattle Nicodemus, it works. Nicodemus is apparently confused throughout the rest of the conversation. He cannot make sense of anything that Jesus is telling him. "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" he asks. "How can these things be?"

And maybe his confusion is genuine. There is an ambiguity in Jesus' words. The words we translate as "born from above" could be translated as "born again." And some Christians still prefer the latter option.

Nicodemus wouldn't be the only one that Jesus confused. When Jesus spoke about destroying the temple on one occasion, the authorities assumed he meant the place of worship, but he was referring to his body. When Jesus offered living water to the woman at the well, he was offering something more life-quenching than her daily trips back to that well. When Jesus told a hungry crowd that he was the true bread from heaven, they merely salivated for another "free lunch."

So maybe Nicodemus' confusion is real. Maybe he just doesn't get it.

But then again, maybe he really DOES get it.

Maybe he's not confused. Maybe he just doesn't like what Jesus is saying. Because what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is that his book-learning and his reputation are of no real value in the way God longs to order the world. In fact, things like prestige and credentials get in the way of what God wants to do with Nicodemus and the kind of world Nicodemus is comfortable living in.

Nicodemus had worked hard to establish a reputation for himself. And he was intent on keeping it. (That's why he comes to Jesus in the dead of night.) He had earned for himself a position of authority; his credentials gave him credibility. And Jesus tells him to let it all go.

Jesus tells him to let the Spirit of God blow over him and give him a new birth and a new beginning.

And it's at this point, I think, that we wander into something at least vaguely Trinitarian: Jesus and God and the Spirit are "conspiring" to do something new with Nicodemus, upending him in the process, in order to re-order the world he lives in. And Jesus asks him to believe it.

Jesus says at the end that "whoever believes in him ... may have eternal life," but the words mean so much more than an academic exercise. Biblically, faith and belief have less to do with our intellect (and what we think) and just about everything to do with our hearts (and our how we live).

The last words we hear Jesus speaking this morning mean something like this:

Everyone who looks to me, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, a whole and lasting life.

For God loves the world so much that God wants what's good for everyone in it. And by daring to hope in a New Beginning, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all this trouble merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. God came to help, to put the world right again. ⁱⁱ

That's what Jesus wants for Nicodemus ... and for us ... and for the world.

As I've said, I'm hesitant to get very technically theological about the Trinity, but I do know that at the heart of our understanding of God as three-in-one and one-in-three – each of the three persons of the Trinity co-eternal and none of them superior to another – is a notion that we cannot talk about God without talking about relationships. God never was, and never could be, a monad in isolation. Even apart from creation, the heart of God is about relationship and about love.

And that's why I chose the graphic for the front cover of our bulletins this morning, a Celtic knot with three parts woven together and a heart at the center of it all.



We affirm, what's more, that God couldn't stop there. And so God created the cosmos and humanity and you and me simply in order to have more to love. As one writer puts it:

God's essential and core being has always been a giving and receiving and sharing of love that finally spills out into the whole of the universe and invites all of us into it. ⁱⁱⁱ

Now that sounds pretty cosmic and ethereal, but it gets real in our readings. When Jesus says we need to be born not just of flesh, but also of the Spirit, it's a bit like when St. Paul tells us (in our reading from Romans this morning) that we've been adopted as children of God. And whether we stay with Jesus and a new birth or go with Paul and a new adoption, either way we find ourselves identified not merely as an autonomous, isolated child of God. No, we are asked to re-imagine ourselves as members of one holy family of God, made of love and for love.

Nicodemus might have taken offense. Because what Jesus offers is not easy, not if you're happy with the family you're born into or with the family you've acquired for yourself. It's not at all likely that Nicodemus came to Jesus looking for a new family that night, but that's what Jesus offers him ... and us. It's the only way to "put the world right again."

On our congregation's feast day, we celebrate our live with and within the larger life of God. It has, in my estimation, not so very much to do with what we think about God. It has much more to do with how we live as children in God's holy and undivided family.

I think this is what Michael Curry was saying in his sermon at the royal wedding last weekend. (You had to know I'd find a way to get a little Michael Curry into my sermon this morning.) Jesus invites Nicodemus to imagine himself as nothing more or less than one child among the whole and holy family of God. Which sounds a lot like Michael Curry inviting us to imagine a world where love is the way. So I guess I'll just let our Presiding Bishop have the last word:

Imagine our homes and families when love is the way.
Imagine our homes and families when love is the way.
Imagine neighborhoods and communities when love is the way.
Imagine our governments and nations when love is the way.
Imagine business and commerce when love is the way.
Imagine this tired old world when love is the way.

When love is the way, unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive.
When love is the way, then no child would go to bed hungry in this world ever again.
When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream
and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook.
When love is the way, poverty would become history.
When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary.
When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields
down by the riverside to study war no more.
When love is the way, there's plenty good room. Plenty good room. For all of God's children.
And when love is the way, we actually treat each other – well, like we're actually family.
When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all,
and we are brothers and sisters. Children of God.
My brothers and sisters, that's a new heaven, a new earth, a new world.
A new human family. ^{iv}

ⁱ A partial list @ <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/Trinitarian%20Heresies.html> defines a good number of heresies. (I'm pretty sure it's only a partial list). Here's the list provided here:

Modalism (i.e. Sabellianism, Noetianism and Patripassianism)

...taught that the three persons of the Trinity as different "modes" of the Godhead ... A typical modalist approach is to regard God as the Father in creation, the Son in redemption, and the Spirit in sanctification. In other words, God exists as Father, Son and Spirit in different eras, but never as triune. Stemming from Modalism, ...

Tritheism

... confesses the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three independent divine beings; three separate gods who share the 'same substance'. This is a common mistake because of misunderstanding of the use of the term 'persons' in defining the Trinity.

Arianism

... denied [Christ was] fully divine status. The Arian controversy was of major importance in the development of Christology during the fourth century and was addressed definitely in the Nicene Creed.

Docetism

...taught that Jesus Christ as a purely divine being who only had the "appearance" of being human ...

Ebionitism

... regarded [Jesus] as a purely human figure.

Macedonianism

...that that the Holy Spirit is a created being.

Adoptionism

...taught that Jesus was born totally human and only later was "adopted" – either at his baptism or at his resurrection – by God in a special (i.e. divine) way.

Partialism

...taught that Father, Son and Holy Spirit together are components of the one God. This led them to believe that each of the persons of the Trinity is only part God, only becoming fully God when they come together.

ⁱⁱ My paraphrase is loosely re-paraphrasing of Eugene Peterson paraphrase of John 3:15-17.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose @ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/05/trinity-b-three-in-one-plus-one/>.

^{iv} Michael Curry @ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-currys-sermon-royal-wedding>.