

## SPG#206, Trinity Sunday

June 7, 2009

Isaiah 6:1-8

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

Trinity Sunday represents a most unusual feast day in the church year. It is as though we, as a people, have been climbing up a high mountain. On the way up the mountain we have encountered the writer of the Gospel of John, teaching how Jesus is “the Word become flesh.” How he is both God and human simultaneously. And we have heard Jesus say, “I and the Father are one.” And we have heard Jesus talking about how he would leave as a man, but would be with us through the presence of the Holy Spirit. And so, after considering some rather challenging theological/spiritual concepts, we have arrived at the top of the mountain to consider again the mystery of the Trinity, the mystery of God the three in one. And it may be, on the top of the mountain, as we tackle one more challenging piece of spirituality, that we do not know where we really are.

And perhaps we know that we have arrived at a significant place in the church year.

But we may not be able to say much about why it is significant.

Jesus frequently talked with listeners about human things such as food, or growing things, or friendship. But in those conversations, he would typically place a challenging piece of spirituality. So it would have been common for listeners in the first century, in one of these conversations, to be resonating with something familiar Jesus had said, but at the same time be mystified by what else he had said of a spiritual nature. You may recall when Jesus said in one of these conversations, “Those who follow me will eat my flesh and drink my blood.”

Then the gospel writer says, “Many turned from him, after hearing this, and did not follow him.” Those who no longer followed him may have liked Jesus. They may have enjoyed what he said about camaraderie and friendship. But apparently they were not able to negotiate some of the extraordinary spiritual things Jesus had said.

We have such a conversation in today’s gospel. Jesus is speaking with Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who is identified as **a leader of the Jews**. In the conversation Jesus says in reference to understanding spiritual matters, that he, Nicodemus, must be born again.

Or, the more modern translation in today’s gospel reads **born from above**.

When Nicodemus expresses consternation and confusion at this teaching, Jesus utters one of my favorites of all his responses when he says, **You are a teacher of Israel, and you do not know this?**

In our own individual study of the scripture, it is in our appreciation and comprehension of such conversations that we ourselves come to an understanding of the challenging spirituality of the Trinity. If we were Nicodemus today, we would be asking Jesus about the Trinity.

Theologian Hans Kung, in his book, One Being a Christian, says that we must always remember that the Trinity was not originally an object of theoretical speculation. It had more to do with a profession of faith or an act of praise.

In other words, he maintains that, in the scripture, there is no formal doctrine of the Trinity. However, says Kung, since the time of the writing of the New Testament, many thinkers have contributed to our current understanding of the Trinity. To name a few key ones would include Augustine, Cyprian, and Tertullian. Kung discusses various understandings of the Trinity. In the western tradition, beginning with Augustine, He says there is a unity of operation and revelation. In other words, the persons of the Trinity are likened to three stars coming after each other, with the first star giving its light to the second, and the second to the third. These stars, seen by the human eye, are seen as one. Kung himself maintains that our understanding of the Trinity is dependent on our understanding of the relationship between God the Father and Jesus with reference to the Spirit.

There is much to be gained from a study of how various thinkers have seen the Trinity. But often, I think our reluctance to study a mystery keeps us at arm's length from that benefit. On the other hand, categorizing the Trinity as a complex theological dogma may be another way of saying it is unreachable to the mass of believers.

I have discovered in my own life that an individual's experience of the Trinity is an essential part of understanding the Trinity. For example, think of the times when God brought you through a rough time in your life. Perhaps you experienced God as loving you to the point of being a help to you. Think of the times when you knew that God loved you even though you felt you did not deserve it. Perhaps in those times you experienced God as forgiving and accepting.

Think of the times in this church when you felt that God was holding us together, even though there were many things that could pull us apart.

In those examples and countless other ones, we experience God as multi-faceted. We experience God in different ways at different times. If you are aware of this in the broad stroke of your life over time, then you are on the road that goes to understanding the Trinity.

I hear in these considerations and conversations in scripture like Nicodemus, the invitation to stretch with the heart, to stretch with the mind, to stretch with the imagination in order to come away with a personal spiritual gain. In an alternate gospel for Trinity Sunday, there is Jesus' statement that **When the Spirit comes, he will guide you into all truth.** That means that in our stretching to understand, to perceive, to feel, and to know our limitations about knowing the Trinity, God shows us truth that we could never get on our own. He reveals truth that we could never get with our own understanding. And so we are invited to search, to struggle, to stretch, to seek.

But then we are invited to realize limitations and to receive via the revelation of God.

The invitation to know the Trinity is an invitation to be human in the fullest sense.

In the Trinity then, we are not just talking about a lofty theological consideration for those with graduate degrees in theology. We are talking about a truth we encounter when we risk seeking and considering. When we risk opening our hearts and our minds to that which we have not known before, to that which we can discover, and to that which can be shown us by God.

In his book, Soulmaking, The Desert Way of Spirituality, author Alan Jones refers to the story in Genesis 18 of the appearance of God to Abraham. He appears to Abraham in the form of three young men. The story, says Jones, is about hospitality. Abraham and Sarah prepare a meal for their divine guest. But, he says, the story is also a symbolic picture of the inner communal life of God. God appears to Abraham as three persons.

The three persons are intimately related, and they have a single purpose in appearing to Abraham. There is unity and oneness in the three. Jones says that these three are “tenderly inclined” to each other, and represent an icon of hospitality for humans.

The “appearance” of God is God disclosing himself to Abraham. Like God humans are communal beings. We have, according to Jones, a trinitarian nature. We are not meant to live in isolation. We discover who we are as we disclose ourselves to another, and as we allow them to disclose to us. By our very nature we bear the pattern of communal-trinitarian life, just as God does. This means that the more we are tenderly inclined toward each other, the more we are like God. The more we are like who we are meant to be. Humans are meant to be hospitable. Humans are meant to be loving.

And so, per Alan Jones, we do not have to look far for evidence of the Trinity in life. It is written on our hearts as individuals and as a community.

Jesus, when he told the disciples about his going to the Father, and the Spirit coming, was not giving them a theological treatise. He was telling them who he really was. He was self disclosing.

We will learn more about the Trinity, then, by learning more about loving each other.

We will learn more as we are tenderly inclined toward each other.

May our inclinations toward each other be more and more tender. And may that which is written on our hearts be written in our lives. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen