

Sunday, May 22nd – Trinity Sunday

Readings

Many people think that what's written in the Bible has mostly to do with getting people into heaven—getting right with God, saving their eternal souls. It does have to do with that, of course, but not mostly. It is equally concerned with living on this earth—living well, living in robust sanity. In our Scriptures, heaven is not the primary concern, to which earth is a tag-along afterthought. “On earth as it is in heaven” is Jesus’ prayer. “Wisdom” is the biblical term for this on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven everyday living. Wisdom is the art of living skillfully in whatever actual conditions we find ourselves. It has virtually nothing to do with information as such, with knowledge as such. A college degree is no certification of wisdom—nor is it primarily concerned with keeping us out of moral mud puddles, although it does have a profound moral effect upon us. Proverbs concentrates on these concerns more than any other book in the Bible. Attention to the here and now is everywhere present in the stories.

Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31

¹Do you hear Lady Wisdom calling?
Can you hear Madame Insight raising her voice?
²She’s taken her stand at First and Main,
at the busiest intersection.
³Right in the city square
where the traffic is thickest, she shouts,
⁴“You—I’m talking to all of you,
everyone out here on the streets!
²²“GOD sovereignly made me—the first, the basic—
before he did anything else.
²³I was brought into being a long time ago,
well before Earth got its start.
²⁴I arrived on the scene before Ocean,
yes, even before Springs and Rivers and Lakes.
²⁵Before Mountains were sculpted and Hills took shape,
I was already there, newborn;
²⁶Long before GOD stretched out Earth’s Horizons,
and tended to the minute details of Soil and Weather,
²⁷And set Sky firmly in place,
I was there.
When he mapped and gave borders to wild Ocean,
²⁸built the vast vault of Heaven,
and installed the fountains that fed Ocean,
²⁹When he drew a boundary for Sea,
posted a sign that said, NO TRESPASSING,
And then staked out Earth’s foundations,

³⁰I was right there with him, making sure everything fit.
Day after day I was there, with my joyful applause,
always enjoying his company,
³¹Delighted with the world of things and creatures,
happily celebrating the human family.

In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, God is presented as speaking creation into existence. God speaks the word and it happens: heaven and earth, ocean and stream, trees and grass, birds and fish, animals and humans. Everything, seen and unseen, called into being by God's spoken word. In deliberate parallel to the opening words of Genesis, John presents God as speaking salvation into existence. This time God's word takes on human form and enters history in the person of Jesus. Jesus speaks the word and it happens: forgiveness and judgment, healing and illumination, mercy and grace, joy and love, freedom and resurrection. Everything broken and fallen, sinful and diseased, called into salvation by God's spoken word. For Jesus doesn't impose salvation as a solution; he narrates salvation into being through leisurely conversation, intimate personal relationships, compassionate responses, passionate prayer, and—putting it all together—a sacrificial death. We don't casually walk away from words like that.

John 16: 12-15

¹²“I still have many things to tell you, but you can't handle them now. ¹³But when the Friend comes, the Spirit of the Truth, he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is. He won't draw attention to himself, but will make sense out of what is about to happen and, indeed, out of all that I have done and said. ¹⁴He will honor me; he will take from me and deliver it to you. ¹⁵Everything the Father has is also mine. That is why I've said, ‘He takes from me and delivers to you.’”

Sermon Sunday, May 22, 2016

So I was texting with a friend and student colleague on Friday afternoon. It was one of those intelligent conversations where he was texting me pictures of silly t-shirts because he wants to get some shirts printed to take down to Halifax this summer to sell to the students and then provide any proceeds to a mission that we have worked with before in Halifax. Well this good idea of a conversation digressed and he started sending me cartoons, yes I know a good use of my time, anyway, he sent me one that I wanted to share with you today. It was a cartoon of someone behind the pulpit and the line of the comic said “The title of today's sermon is “I just spent all week working on a sermon and I got nothing.” No that's not true, but as I spent this week working on a sermon, I came to understand that there were two topics here this week and I was actually working on both of them. This lead to a complete stop in the writing process as I came look at what I really wanted to focus on today. And so here we are today.

Now I will be the first one to admit that many times the church uses big words and that these words, although important, can sometimes confuse and confound us. It is important for us know some of these, such as ecclesiology, missiology, and christology, one of the most difficult for us to understand is the Trinitarian understanding of God. What does it mean when we talk about the trinity, this idea of 3 in 1 and 1 in 3.

This is Trinity Sunday and what I find interesting is that it appears that nowhere in the Bible does the term Trinity come up. The Trinitarian understanding of God became theology of the Church in the year 381 at the Council of Constantinople. This is not to say that the Trinitarian understanding of was God something easy to decide on, from the very beginning people struggled with who God was, they struggled with the divinity and humanity of Jesus and they struggled with the idea of the Holy Spirit as even being divine and a part separate from God. Eventually the council adopted a statement that translates into English as, in part: "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages . . . And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets . . ." The statement also affirmed belief "in one holy, catholic [meaning in this context universal, whole or complete] and apostolic Church . . ."

With this declaration in 381, which would become known as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the Trinity as generally understood today became the official belief and teaching concerning the nature of God.

So as we today continue to struggle to understand what the Trinity actually means, we can find that we are in good company with theologians and church thinkers throughout the ages.

Lucy Lind Hogan, a professor of preaching at Wesley Theological seminary in Washington D.C. speaks of the trinity in the following way, "The Holy Trinity is definitely one of those difficult, challenging, thought-provoking doctrines of our faith, but we should not think of it as an exam question that must be answered before we will be admitted to the heavenly banquet. Nor is the Trinity an IQ test to identify the superior intellects and weed out those who are not worthy. Rather the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian Life." A practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life, that is pretty impressive for something that confuses and confounds many of us, but I believe that there is a great deal of truth in that.

Many of you know that I am rather fond of inserting my pop culture references into sermons and as I struggled this week between two opposing yet related ideas I was thinking this would be a sermon that would not end up having one of these references, but I was once again wrong. I was reading a commentary on the passage this morning from John and it was called "The Power of Three."

In that title was what I needed. How many of you have heard of or seen the show Charmed? This television show, from the late 1990s up to mid 2000s was based around 3 sisters. At the death of their maternal grandmother these 3 young women inherit magical powers and come to understand that they have a call to battle evil in the world. The most powerful way they do

this is by understanding and using the strength of the magic of the power of three. As they recite “The power of three, shall set you free,” the strongest evil is overcome. What an interesting take on Trinity Sunday and the idea of the Trinity, the power of three shall set us free. The Trinity, a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life.

The reading this morning from John is very short, a mere 4 verses, and it begins in a rather strange and almost prohibitive way with Jesus saying to those he is talking to, “I still have many things to tell you, but you can’t handle them now.” What comes next is an explanation of an active participant in the lives of believers, that which will come next will guide and help to make sense, but not for itself but for Jesus and in Jesus, that which is of God. The 3 in 1 and 1 in 3.

Scott Hoozee from the Centre for Excellence in Preaching describes this interaction in the following way, “In contrast to Western tradition that has often depicted the Trinity by way of a triangle, the Eastern tradition has usually opted for a circle to convey the idea of the circular dance of 3 persons in God, Call it the divine choreography, if you will. It’s a dance of life and love that is never-ending as each person adoringly waltzes with every other person in a divine eagerness to make known to the world the riches of one another.” John tells us, “The Spirit of the Truth, he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is. He won’t draw attention to himself, but will make sense out of what is about to happen and, indeed, out of all that I have done and said.” All of this leads to an understanding of the Trinity as not something that is stagnant, but rather that which is active and moving, that which can invigorate and transform. I wonder if that is because the idea of the Trinity is actually all about relationship. The relationship of each member of the Trinity to each other, and to the whole of God. Not only that but also the relationship of the Trinity to us and our relationship with God. The Trinity is all about relationship, it is relational.

We talk of the Trinity as God, Jesus and Holy Spirit, but I wonder how we might understand it if we added a bit more. Celebrate God’s Presence is a United Church liturgy resource and in this resource there are places where they replace God, Jesus and Holy Spirit with Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. So let’s put these together as they might help us to understand the relational aspects of the Trinity, God the creator, Jesus the redeemer, the Holy Spirit the sustainer. God the creator has created all and as our New Creed states, “has created and is creating” we as part of that creation have been created to be in relationship with God. We are called to be God in the world and as we do this we become closer to God, we are brought into deeper relationship with God. But we fail and so God comes in Jesus to be a living example to what it means to be God in the world and as our example of how we are to live a life in God. So God the creator, creates us to be in relationship and Jesus the redeemer comes so that we might come into true relationship with God through his example, as everything Jesus did pointed to God’s love for us and God’s desire for us to be in deeper relationship with God-self. The Holy Spirit the sustainer is that which points us back to Jesus, helps us to make sense of who Jesus was in the world, gives us the courage, the strength to emulate Jesus in the world, focuses us back to Jesus, who points us back to God’s lover for us.

For you see in reality the Trinity is really all about relationship, it is about God and God's love for us and God's work and desire to be in relationship with us as beloved members of God's creation.

By the Trinity we are challenged and guided, we are redeemed and sustained into a life of relationship with God. The Trinity is God's way of making all of this possible, it is God's way to communicate to us that we are loved, it is what truly makes our life as Christians possible. The power of three, to truly set us free, a radical consequence for Christian life. If only we will live into what the Trinity truly promises. The power to transform our lives as we become full of the Spirit, we are turned back towards Jesus and in turning back to Jesus we are brought into closer relationship with God. The Trinity is not something to figure out, but rather something to experience, something to live, something that will bring us into deeper more authentic relationship with this 3in 1, 1 in 3 God that is the creator. Let it be so. Amen.