

John 16. 12-15

June 16, 2019, Trinity Sunday

Relativity

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If you pay attention to the secular media when the Presbyterian Church holds its General Assemblies, and if you remember things like this, you may recall that a few years ago there was a huge uproar over the Trinity. Like many things that are reported about church business, most of the articles published did not bother to give the entire story. Most simply took enough information to make it sound like Presbyterians were idiots. The event that gave rise to the media coverage that year was a study report presented that, among many other things, suggested the possibility of using different titles for the three persons of the Trinity. Rather than the traditional persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we could substitute titles like Creator, Savior and Sustainer. Of course, there were some silly suggestions and those were the ones publicized the most. We could take a common object like an egg and describe the Trinity as Hard Boiled, Scrambled and Poached. One that I have actually heard used is water: Ice, Liquid and Vapor.

From the top, please understand that the Trinity is not in the Bible. That is to say, the Church constructed the doctrine of the Trinity based on the human descriptions found in the Bible of our encounters with God. One of the things that I often say about the Trinity is that it is our effort to describe God's relationship with us. When we read the Bible, we find many personifications of God. The Proverbs reading describes a particular attribute of God – Wisdom. It just so happens that personification is feminine. Lady Wisdom. God is like the mother hen who spreads her wings to protect her brood of chicks, just as God protects the people of God. We are familiar with the image of the Good Shepherd and we are not so far from Memorial Day weekend that many people can recall images of God as the Righteous Warrior.

The Gospel writer, John, talks about the Spirit of Truth. It is the Spirit of Truth that dares to speak to us. It reaches out to us. It is the Truth worth knowing. Every now and then, when some truth hits us like a ton of bricks we say, "I've got it." But when it is the Spirit of Truth, we ought to say, "It got me."

As Christians we do not only believe in God or the Spirit. We believe in the Incarnation of God. We believe that God refused to be alone. God became flesh and moved in with us as one of us. God refuses to be relegated to some vague distant realm that is floating around out there somewhere. God has a face and a name, Jesus the Christ. God refuses to be God without us.

I think, maybe I hope, that you already know this, but I will go ahead and say it. God does not only love us, God comes to us, speaks, reveals and reaches out to us when all the while we think we are reaching out to God and searching for God. I also think that is one of the reasons you come here on Sunday mornings. You come here, at least some of you, some of the time, hoping to be met by the Word made Flesh. True worship, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is always incarnational, personal and embodied.

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Sometimes we forget. That may be another reason for coming here on Sundays, this is the place to remember.

Way back in March, I had a conversation with a member of the stewardship committee. We talked about reminding this congregation of stewardship. Stewardship is not a once a year thing. Stewardship is a Christian lifestyle. I want you to think about stewardship all year, rather than only when we are working on the budget. I cautioned that person that we would hear criticism of this change. There are people who stay away from church during stewardship season because they do not want to hear the fact that the church needs money. Or that church members need to make a financial commitment. When a church member asks me why I talk about money so much, I say because it is in the Bible so much. The other comment I have heard is this, “When will we stop talking about money, money, money and get back to more spiritual matters?”

The church has tried being spiritual. That is how the Presbyterian Church in the South justified slavery. As was done in South Africa. You see how much easier life is when Christian faith is only spiritual? When it is an idea that we can all discuss rationally? When Christianity is only a concept? That is not what the Christian faith is. Faith happens when we are encountered by a person who does not say, “Think about me,” but rather says, “Follow me.”

John imagines a Christian community that is not locked into the past, but understands what Jesus means for its own time. John anticipates that changing circumstances and the emergence of new questions – stem cell research, the ability to artificially prolong life, religious pluralism – will require the faith community to think afresh. Relying on the Spirit of Truth, the community will be led where it needs to go. In today’s contentious world, where we choose up sides to see who really knows Jesus, I believe the revelation of Jesus is not about who has the correct orthodoxy, but rather do we care about the things Jesus cares about, and do we carry out the kind of ministry that reflects Jesus’ ministry.

How simple our lives would be if the Spirit of Truth was simply rational and revealed to us the truth with the upper-case T. Because the Spirit of Truth is one person in the Trinity, the truth revealed is about relationship. It is the truth that flows from relationships and cements our relationships. The popular culture of America glorifies the individual. This emphasis on the individual prompts us to evaluate our experiences on what they do for me. Too many marriages flounder because the perceived needs of one or both partners are not being met. People chose which church they will attend based on how a congregation’s programs, worship service, (and God forbid) the preacher, or property fit with their tastes and desires.

Does anyone evaluate a church on how it points to God? What score would Government Street Presbyterian Church received if that is how we were evaluated? The entire Gospel According to John is designed to tell the story of Jesus pointing to God. In this story for today, Jesus assures us that the Holy Spirit will communicate with the church in such a way as to point people to Christ. There is no competition between the persons of the Trinity. One of the characteristics of the Trinity is unselfishness. We hear a great deal about the omniscience, omnipotence and

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omnipresence of God, but how often do we hear about the humility of God? How often do we imitate the humility of God?

When I was living and working in Birmingham, every time I walked into St. Vincent's Medical Center, I stopped to read the motto of the Sisters who founded the hospital, "The love of Christ compels us." When we have a relationship with the living God, that gift of grace wells up within us and compels us to works of caring and compassion. We are compelled to tell our story of faith because in the person of Jesus Christ we have experienced the story of faith. God has determined to not be vague or intangible. God is personal. God speaks. Are we listening for and to the Spirit of Truth? When we are, then we are not content to relegate our so-called faith to Sunday morning glimpses of eternity. When we are led by the Holy Spirit, we have a faith that comes out to where we live and affects how we live.

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