

Sermon

“God Will Stop at Nothing”

June 16th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

Trinity Sunday

Based on Romans 5:1-8 and John 3:1-17

SCRIPTURE:

Romans 5:1-8

¹ Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. ⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. [NRSV]

John 3:1-17

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the

Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: Almighty God, as we have read and heard the words of scripture, we are pointed to your living Word who walked among us; and we are surrounded by your Spirit, who whispers words within our hearts and minds. Inspire us in our hearing and reflecting, that we may move beyond your words into life-changing acts of grace, love, hope, and peace; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

Trinity Sunday

Today is Trinity Sunday—the day when the church celebrates the mystery of God as Three in One (three things, three persons, all at the same time): Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; one God, who is Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter to all. And, that’s exactly what the Trinity is—a mystery—a mystery that far greater theological minds than anyone in this room today have not fully resolved. Still, like so many other areas of faith and belief, we don’t let that stop us. In fact, one of the greatest aspects of faith in a God who is Three in One is that we don’t have to necessarily understand something in order to believe it ... otherwise, it wouldn’t be called faith.

Nicodemus Visits Jesus at Night

But, the Trinity is a mystery, and perhaps there is no better biblical character to read about on Trinity Sunday than good ole’ Nicodemus—one who curiously comes to see this mysterious Jesus, this teacher and miracle worker stirring up the crowds. He comes to visit Jesus at night, probably hoping to avoid detection by anyone who would disapprove, because he desperately wants to know more—he wants to know more about the kingdom of God. He’s curious. He’s inquisitive. He’s very smart. And, yet, what does Jesus do ... he totally confounds the poor man. Jesus starts telling him about mysteriously being “born from above,” and “being born of water and Spirit.” I’ve often thought, why couldn’t Jesus have just spoken to Nicodemus as if he was delivering a children’s sermon?!?! I mean, boil it down, Jesus! Maybe then Nicodemus would have understood (maybe!).

Analogies for the Trinity—“Three in One”

For many years on past Trinity Sundays I have given children’s sermons that included nifty analogies to help explain the mystery of the Trinity, hoping that people of all ages were listening (and hoping that what I was saying would actually help). I also recently included these analogies in the series of Sunday school classes on the Trinity. I’ve always been fondest of the water analogy—liquid, ice, and steam—the same chemical compound, H₂O, but three distinct forms! Then there’s the apple analogy—cut it open and you have three distinct parts—the peel, the fruit, and the core (with all the seeds)—again, three in one! And, there’s also the flame analogy—light, fire, and heat—three distinct properties all at the same time! Three in one. Three in one. Now, we’ve got it, right? But, no, the Trinity is *still* a mystery.

The Trinity Permeates God’s Word

Well, to be fair, the Bible does not specifically use the word “Trinity,” nor does it clearly explain the doctrine of the Trinity. It’s actually a later theological development by Christ-followers trying to make some sort of sense of our amazing God, realizing that scripture teaches the essential truths which lead to the doctrine. Indeed, the reality of God and Christ and the Holy Spirit, working together, accomplishing God’s redemptive purposes, permeates the New Testament—in fact, it permeates the entire Bible, as we discussed on Pentecost Sunday last week regarding God’s wind, breath, and Spirit being present from the first pages of the Bible through the end. The Apostle Paul refers to our God who *is* Three in One on numerous occasions in his letters, and the gospel writers themselves are aware of the three persons of the Trinity. Matthew tells us to go throughout the world baptizing people in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Luke was well aware of the Spirit’s movement before, during, and after Jesus lived. And, then in today’s reading from John, all three members of the Trinity are in the mix by verse 5 of chapter 3, as Jesus attempts to help Nicodemus comprehend what believing in “God in the flesh” really means.

Now, Jesus’ message was profoundly difficult for many people of his day to understand, and still is for that matter, so it’s not really surprising that even a

man of Nicodemus' stature and intelligence was left scratching his head. It was Paul who later more succinctly summarized Jesus' words to Nicodemus by saying in his second letter to the Corinthians that "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17) ... That for Christ-following people of faith, everything *has* become new, and all of it is accomplished by the creative love of God, the redemptive offering of Christ, and the empowering, comforting presence of the life-giving Spirit—these Three are indeed One.

"The First Breakfast" Song

Speaking of our God who *is* Three in One, here's another way of thinking about it, as captured in the lyrics from a song called *The First Breakfast*, written by a Presbyterian singer/songwriter named David M. Bailey, about his thoughts and perspective on the Trinity, which I shared at the conclusion of the recent Sunday school series on the Trinity.

The song starts out talking about "the very first breakfast in the world" when "Jesus and God sat down to eat" and "the Spirit put on some coffee and joined them at a table set for three. They talked about what had been created. God said, 'I still think it's good,' and Jesus said, 'yes, but I feel nervous.' The Spirit said, 'Well, I guess I would, too, if I were you, and I am, so I do.'" And, the song goes on to talk about God and Jesus having a chat about Jesus being sent into the world to save it. Then finally "Jesus says, 'I'm ready, just tell me when to go,' and God wiped a tear from his face and said, 'This hurts me more than you'll know.' And, Jesus said, 'Dad, it's okay. We both know it's what has to be done.' God said, 'That does not make it easy. After all, you're still my only son, and we are one. Well, I'd do it myself, if I could. But, you know, it would not be the same. So I'm sending you instead like I always said I would. You'll have a face, a family, and a name.'" So God goes over the details of Jesus' 33 years, and Jesus takes it all in, even asking God if it's not too late to change his mind. And, God said, "'Well, I've thought about it forty ways 'till Sunday. Gonna turn it upside down and inside out. The costly demonstration of unexpected love will be proof beyond a shadow of a doubt.' And, Jesus said, 'I'm with you all the way.'" And, then the

song wonderfully talks about how the Spirit's been awfully quiet during their whole conversation, with Jesus even pointing out that the Spirit had already been around the world checking things out before. And, God tells Jesus that the Spirit will "go back after you return. Trust me, its all part of the plan." Then toward the end of the song, Jesus takes "a slow sip of his coffee" and says he's ready to go. And, "with pride in his eyes and sorrow in his voice" God told him some last remaining details about Mary and Joseph and growing up in the world—details about his call, the disciples, and the last three days of his life. And, Jesus said, "I'll do my best. But, I never thought love would feel like this."

The Trinity—God's Love Poured Out

And, there you have it—the essence and idea of the Trinity in one word—*love*. Love that is relational, intimate, abundant, relentless, freely given, and poured out to all of us. Love that only comes in one size that fits all—not just a nation, or just the good people, or just one group of people—but the *whole wide* world. Love that is also deeply and profoundly personal, as St. Augustine once said, "God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love." And, God loves every single person who ever lived, or will live, just exactly like that—people from Bible stories like Peter and Zacchaeus and a woman at a well and a blind man standing on a roadside; and people in the real world, like you and me, and people who need help from food pantries and soup kitchens, and people who lose everything in floods and so many more people, countless others! Remarkably, thankfully, God holds nothing back from us. Perhaps that abundant outpouring of God and God's love, for us and for our salvation, is the primary message to be proclaimed on Trinity Sunday by Christ-followers everywhere.

God Will Stop at Nothing

The Apostle Paul also spoke about the abundant outpouring of God and God's love in our reading from Romans today, saying that "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). And, then John's gospel speaks to the issue as well, saying, "for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." not "to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17). Every single time we read

and hear those words—words that can be aptly described as the gospel in miniature—we should remind ourselves that God will stop at nothing to save this world—to turn it upside down and inside out!

That our God who *is* Three in One—distinct, but not divided, refuses to leave us in the dark, even if we show up in the middle of the night, confused and questioning like Nicodemus. That our God who *is* Three in One refuses to stop searching for us and pursuing us all the days of our lives. That our God who *is* Three in One first created everything that is seen and unseen, but knew it would take something more. So our God who *is* Three in One sent his Son into the world—the Word made flesh, Emmanuel, “God with us”—to rescue and recover humanity, and to reclaim, rename, and reauthor the stories of our lives with a new life empowered by the grace of God. But, God the Son knew he couldn’t live forever as Jesus of Nazareth, and so our God who *is* Three in One sent the gift of God’s Spirit, unshaped by human hands and “blowing” where it wills “from above”—giving each of us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hands to serve God’s kingdom in our midst.

Our God who *is* Three in One—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who creates, redeems, and comforts—who loves beyond measure—will stop at nothing to save the world, to turn it upside down and inside out. That’s worth believing in ... even if we don’t necessarily understand it. Amen.