

May 31, 2015
Holy Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 6:1-8

1 In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, the edges of his robe filling the temple. 2 Winged creatures were stationed around him. Each had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two their feet, and with two they flew about. 3 They shouted to each other, saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of heavenly forces! All the earth is filled with God's glory!" 4 The doorframe shook at the sound of their shouting, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 I said, "Mourn for me; I'm ruined! I'm a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips. Yet I've seen the king, the LORD of heavenly forces!" 6 Then one of the winged creatures flew to me, holding a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. 7 He touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt has departed, and your sin is removed." 8 Then I heard the Lord's voice saying, "Whom should I send, and who will go for us?" I said, "I'm here; send me."

Romans 8:12-17

12 So then, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation, but it isn't an obligation to ourselves to live our lives on the basis of selfishness. 13 If you live on the basis of selfishness, you are going to die. But if you put to death the actions of the body with the Spirit, you will live. 14 All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons and daughters. 15 You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, "Abba, Father." 16 The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God's children. 17 But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God's heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him.

John 3:1-17

1 There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom." 4 Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?" 5 Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. 6 Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' 8 God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus said, "How are these things possible?" 10 "Jesus answered, "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things? 11 I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up 15 so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. 16 God so loved the world that he gave

his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.
17 God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might
be saved through him.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

It's my pleasure to welcome you to the most
confusing festival day of the church year: Holy Trinity
Sunday! Now, to be sure, we're not trying to
intentionally complicate things. This is no attempt to
play a game of theological hide and seek, though
that might be fun at the picnic in a few weeks.

Rather, we're here to acknowledge and to embrace
the identity of the One True God as our Abba Father,
as Jesus our Messiah, and as Holy Spirit our Comforter.
Three persons, all of whom are one God. A blessed,
confounding, wonderful mystery.

Like Nicodemus in today's Gospel, though, we may become too caught up in the verbiage of the Trinity to experience the gift within. "Born anew?!?!?!!" Nicodemus scoffs at this idea, that one might experience birth once again. Caught in the sheer biological improbability of it all, Nicodemus struggles to hear the grace, that the God of Israel sent Jesus not to condemn the world but to offer salvation, to offer forgiveness and new life, all through this new birth made possible by the Holy Spirit. So when we hear this idea, that the One God somehow exists as three persons, we sometimes end up baffled like Nicodemus, we can't see the forest for the trees. We end up scoffing at God rather than experiencing God.

One possibility to help us better comprehend the Trinity is to begin using analogies. The popular belief is that during his fabled conversion of Ireland, St. Patrick used numerous analogies to describe the Trinity to the Celts. How the clover had three leaves and yet was one plant. How fire also emanates light and heat, three experiences of one object. These things that are three and yet one point to how God is three and yet one. The popularity of this story tells us how vital analogies are to our own understanding of the Trinity. This metaphorical imagery helps us to somehow grasp that something can be simultaneously one thing with three distinct entities.

Of course, the problem is that analogies can't fully express the mystery of the Trinity. One leaf of the

clover isn't the full clover, but the Holy Spirit, one member of the Trinity, is fully God. Neither the light nor heat that comes from the fire is the fire itself, but Jesus, the Son of God, is the same God who gave birth. Whoa. Crazy, but true, and something we say is true each week. Analogies never quite get us to the fullness of God's identity.

In fact, if you follow an analogy too hard, they almost always end up committing some kind of ancient heresy. One of my friends said on Facebook that the only way not to commit heresy when preaching on the Trinity is to say nothing at all and show only pictures of kittens. So here's one of those.

But as one of my professors used to quip, every metaphor eventually breaks down. What we can't

do is expect them to fully explain the truth of the Trinity. Analogies for the Trinity can't grasp the truth of who God is. Rather, they only aspire to say something true about God, to offer a perspective, a view, a lens through which to see a part of God. So rather than stop using the metaphors, instead we ought to recognize the limitations within metaphors while we embrace the truths that they open up to us.

Having heard the story of Nicodemus, I think we're in scriptural company today as we try to understand God's identity, especially in the midst of the confusion. Jesus shares with Nicodemus an analogy of being born anew, or born from above, or born again, which Nicodemus immediately questions. He even names the elephant in the room and asks

Jesus if he means that we must somehow crawl back into our mothers' wombs to experience rebirth. Of course not! Even Jesus' metaphors eventually break down. Of course Jesus didn't mean that we needed a literal rebirth, but rather that the life God brings through Jesus is new, so radically new that it's as though we've been born into a brand new world with a brand new life. If we admit the limits of the analogy, then there's power in realizing the kind of beauty brought by the analogy of being born again into the life of the Trinity.

So when it comes to belief in the Trinity, we benefit from imagery, we benefit from analogy, for when used well, it pushes us beyond our limited expectations of who God is and what God is doing in

the world. We may come to know something more about God that we've never considered before, seeing the perspective brought by others that opens up the Trinity to us in new and exciting ways.

Yet, another wonderful gift of imagery is basking in the beauty of something beyond ourselves. Too often when we encounter something like the Trinity we expect an explanation, and almost always find ourselves disappointed. That's because we're not called to explain God. We're called to proclaim God. There's a key difference here. Explanation gives us control over something, for we understand it completely and can utilize it as a tool.

Mathematicians understand and can explain calculus in such a way that it becomes a helpful tool

in physics and engineering and medicine. I barely understand math well enough for me to explain how I buy my groceries. Explanation is different than proclamation.

Or, think about it this way. I once interviewed my grandfather, Dale, about his time playing baseball on one of the first racially integrated minor league teams in Ohio. At his kitchen table, when I asked what that was like, Grandpa Dale explained to me what it was like to get turned away from restaurants and motels because his teammates were black. He explained to me what it was like to get cussed out and spat on at ballparks across the Midwest because he was playing a game with his friends who happened to be black. And he explained that his black teammates took

even more oppression and prejudice. But when I asked him why he did that, why the entire team did that, he paused. He searched for words. He began to fiddle with the napkin holder and saltshaker, even the digital recorder I was using to get audio of the interview. Finally he looked me in the eyes, and rather than explain the ramifications of integration and the integrity of all people, he simply proclaimed, “Well, Palsy, it was the right thing to do.” Proclamation, rather than explaining to us why something is the way it is, tells us the truth. Proclamation opens up the identity of something, even if we don’t have the words to explain it fully.

Take a look at this image, a 14th century icon of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev. There’s so much going on

here that might be explained. For instance, he began with an even earlier icon of Abraham and Sarah being visited by angels at the Oaks of Mamre, a biblical story traditionally understood to prefigure or depict the Trinity. Then, rather than try to give the Father and the Holy Spirit faces, Rublev gave them all the face of God that walked this earth, the face of Jesus, so that we might know all three are the same God. And yet, each is a different person, gesturing to the other in a way that signals shared leadership, shared authority, and shared submission to one another.

But beyond all this explanation, there's a proclamation here. This is one analogy, one image, of who God is, and one that is layered with meaning.

God is at table with us, sharing the bread and the wine. God is gesturing to us both leadership and submission. God is challenging us to embrace the mystery of the Trinity not just as a doctrine or dogma, but as a gift that welcomes us into a vibrantly divine relationship. We're meant for life with the Trinity, so God invites us to a table, in the presence of the Father, set by the Son, and welcomed by the Holy Spirit, so that we might all find the same kind of fellowship, love, and life that we see at this table. That's proclamation rather than explanation.

In proclamation, we receive a gift. We can experience God rather than explain God. Notice that Isaiah's first move wasn't to write down what he saw when he encountered God seated on a heavenly

throne with angels abounding around; that came later. Rather, he first cried out to God, asking for a cleansing, and received it. When we hear the proclamation of a truth we can't deny, we experience God in such a way that we might find powerful forgiveness, powerful grace, powerful transformation. Even Nicodemus' doubt leads to an experience, an engagement, with God. For even as Nicodemus seeks explanation, Jesus instead shares this beloved proclamation: "God so loved the world that he gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Jesus." That's the kind of proclamation we find in the beauty of the

Trinity. Experience of forgiveness, the grace of the Trinity. Experience of eternal life, the life of the Trinity. Experience of salvation, the embrace of the Trinity. We can bask in that truth forever without ever fully explaining a single word of it.

That's ultimately what the Trinity is all about. God created a world in which we might live and find life abundant. Though we sinned and disconnected ourselves from God's goodness, God in Jesus Christ reconnected us to God through his life, death, and resurrection. To keep us connected to God, God the Holy Spirit comes to us to dwell within our bodies and souls, to continually bind us to the Father's heart, to Jesus' vibrant life, and to the mission of sharing the Gospel inspired by the Holy Spirit. So let's use

analogies and images, metaphors and songs, creation and relationships all to help us see God, to see the Trinity, alive and at work in the world. Though all metaphors eventually break down, perhaps the greatest mystery of the Trinity is that God never breaks down. The Trinity is always at work, finding us, changing us, and sending us to proclaim the three persons who are our God. Amen.