

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Trinity Sunday, June 3, 2012
Lessons: Isaiah 6:1-8 and Matthew 9:35-38; 14:14-20

CALLED FOR LIFE

Trinity Sunday seems an oddity on the church calendar because it represents a doctrine rather than an event. Christmas, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost all celebrate events that together proclaim the Christ event. Trinity Sunday suggests we celebrate a doctrine formulated in the Fourth Century and established as orthodox by the winning side in a long and bitter church conflict never settled completely. The doctrine proclaims one God in three Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The mystery it seeks to explain is how One can be Three and Three can be One – that is, how the One God can be three distinct Persons and how the three Persons can be the One God. While the affirmations are often simplified to the point of distortion, the explanations get very complex philosophically. Relax, I am not going to attempt the explanations this morning, nor will I try to enforce orthodoxy as though it were the same as faith in God. Orthodoxy means correct belief; faith means entrusting ourselves and our lives to the love and mercy of God. When beliefs guide, encourage, and strengthen our faith, they serve us well; if instead correctness of belief substitutes itself for faith, empowering us to judge ourselves truly Christian and others falsely so, our orthodoxy puts us in grave danger. My desire this morning is to draw from the biblical affirmations behind the doctrine of the Trinity help we can share as we go forward in life.

In the Bible's book of Proverbs, we find a poetic form the sages use several times to encourage us to think about mysteries of life. One says, "Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand." Another says, "Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up." I borrow this "three things and a fourth" formula to share with you encouragement for faith, hope, and love we can draw from the doctrine of the Trinity. Three things there are: God is Person, God loves, and God desires relationship with us.

"May the force be with you," is a well-wish familiar to fans of the Star Wars movies. The history of humanity's religious practices identifies many attempts to tap, use, and control the impersonal force or power thought to be present in the world. Christians have sometimes come close to identifying the Holy Spirit wrongly as such a wonderful but dangerous force to which they could surrender themselves but then experience for their own gratification or channel to gain power. More intellectual people may regard God as a grand idea that elevates human desires above the banality of greed, lust, and prejudice. For them, God

becomes a projection of our highest ideals, our noblest thoughts, our most virtuous aspirations. In this way, they create the God they will worship in hope of becoming the best people they can be. But, no, God is not power or idea. God is not impersonal thing or concept. God is Person: subject not object, “I” not “it.” So, God answers Moses’ request for a divine name with, “I am who I am,” or, perhaps better, “I will be (with you) who I will be.”

Being Person, not impersonal thing, God loves, and love is so deeply and thoroughly essential to God that the First Letter of John to the Christian churches declares, “God is love,” not to define God as love but to assure us that love is God’s one truth and God’s only motive for creating us and dealing with us. Whatever is not of love is not of God.

Life is neither a test nor a race. We are not made to be either winners or losers, nor are we given life that is ultimately meaningless. The entire biblical story, which extends to your life story and mine, tells of God’s unrelenting desire for relationship with us. The doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that God has always loved, that somehow beyond our comprehension being God has been a relational matter forever – a matter of love among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, but love urges itself to reach out to love more. It is relentless and ever willing to grow. Even human love is increased, not diminished, by extending itself to others. One loved does not replace another who has been loved. Whatever sibling rivalry may think and feel, a second child does not decrease the parents’ love for the first. Competition for a limited supply of love is sin’s notion, not God’s way at all. True, there is human love not to be shared around freely in the same form; what is pledged to one and only one is not to be given falsely to another – hence the commandment forbidding adultery – but love takes a wide variety of forms, and God’s love expands infinitely. So, Jesus declares in the Gospel of John, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself.”

Three things there are about the Triune God that I believe encourage us today to grow in faith, hope, and love: God is Person not thing, God’s truth is love not judgment, and God desires to include us in the love that is eternal. A fourth thing I share with you also: God calls us individually and collectively to live with new meaning and serve with new purpose.

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you into fishers for people.”

And Jesus tells us, as he told his first disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you to bear fruit – fruit that will endure.”

You are called for life, and so am I. The next hymn we'll sing, "Here I Am, Lord," is not for ordination only, but for each of us and all of us together. Jesus came to rescue us from meaningless existence and lead us into life. He does not just give us life in the sense of handing it to us like a package, any more than parents give their children life simply by enabling their birth. Jesus' giving us life and his teaching us how to live it are equally parts of the same process we call salvation. He expresses his frustration with his disciples when he asks, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' but not do as I say?"

I can retire from pastoral ministry and from what the church calls "active ministry," but I cannot retire from Jesus' call to live, grow, and serve as his disciple and, ultimately, as his friend or comrade. I object to one word in the translation of the prayer offered by Francis of Assisi, "Lord make me an *instrument* of your peace." An instrument is a tool, and you and I are not mindless implements God uses for specific purposes and then sets aside, as I might take up sod with a grub hoe, then set it down and pick up a rake to finish the job. You are called to be an agent for Jesus Christ – an agent of something that comes from him. There is something coming from him of such great importance that it makes all the difference in the world. Is it power to force people to comply with God's will and serve God's purpose whether they wish to or not? No. Is it authority to speak truth that overrules the world's falsehoods and compels people to accept its truthfulness? No, it is not. Is it benign love that somehow finds the world cute like a puppy or a kitten, ignoring the world's cruelties and life-destroying competitions for power and privilege? No, indeed it is not such useless, sentimental, slushy love. What then is this thing that makes all the difference for us and calls us relentlessly to live and serve as its agents for Jesus Christ?

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

It is compassion, the willingness to "suffer with" other people whose pain hurts us only because it hurts them. Jesus' compassion is the weakness that has proved and will prove greater than everything the world considers strong.

Why did I include the story of Jesus' feeding the crowd with a tiny offering of food? Well, it says he did it out of compassion for the people, but it also represents for me the reality of my calling and the church's. Are we not always trying to serve and make do with just five loaves and two fish? Jesus doesn't require us to be equal to the task, although that truth is no excuse for laziness or willful incompetence. He calls us to live and serve as agents of his compassion in an often heartless world and to trust God for the results, and in the end, there will be twelve basketfuls left over. Amen.