

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2009
Lessons: Exodus 3:1-12 and John 14:23-29

FINDING HELP AND UNDERSTANDING ON HOLY GROUND

The Bible has no doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, the Bible has no doctrines at all, because doctrines are systematic treatments of the history of God's redemptive love told by the biblical witnesses. They are not the Bible's truth but attempts to understand that truth and teach it. They should be instructional, not dictatorial.

Suppose you are rummaging in your attic and find an old box you have never before opened. Inside you discover a packet of love letters written to, say, your great-great-great-grandmother. Probably, you would just read them, but you could make a study of them if you wished, and you could write summaries of how this man expressed his love, what his attitudes were, and how he hoped their relationship would turn out. What you wrote would be an analysis of his letters to help you understand. Doctrine is something like that.

These imaginary letters themselves are not systematic. They are love letters, written with concern for a relationship, to make it grow and see it through its rough spots. A systematic analysis of them fails to capture the moments. That's the way it is with doctrine's taking the Bible by topic. Doctrine systematizes teachings but misses the moments of the situation at the time with its passions of love, fear, regret, anger, and reconciliation.

The Bible's raw material for what in the Fourth Century became the doctrine of the Trinity is, like the love letters, relational and contextual. God spoke through the prophets and the New Testament writers to the people in their particular times and circumstances. The doctrine of the Trinity is highly philosophical and political. The bishops of the church were engaged in philosophical conflict, and the Roman Emperor Constantine wanted to unify and refit Christianity as the imperial religion. So, the doctrine of the Trinity hammered out at the Council of Nicaea helped save the church from heresy (supposedly) and perhaps gave the emperor the Christianity he wanted. But we don't live in the Roman Empire of the Fourth Century, and so I think we need to stand anew on holy ground before the mystery of God.

From the burning bush, the voice of God tells Moses to come no closer, and throughout the encounter, every attempt by Moses to get a handle on God is rebuffed. But even as God tells the mere mortal to keep a respectful distance, God moves closer to the man and to the people of Israel in their distress. God feels their sufferings with them, understands

their shame and hopelessness, hears their cries, and is moved to rescue them. Even while telling Moses to keep his distance, God says also, “I will be with you.” That’s the paradigm for all who are called by God.

We cannot take hold of God or make divine power our own, and we should not try. We cannot fathom the mystery, and we make fools of ourselves if pretend to have done so. Spelling God out, with no mystery and wonder left, is both folly and arrogance. Too many Christians have presumed to be able to read God “like a book” and to formulate exactly what God wants from everyone. Do you yourself not find it insulting if someone says, “I can read you like a book”? Why does anyone wish to insult and belittle God that way? Those who love someone long to be understood but recoil at the idea of being known so well that they can be taken for granted. “You’re so predictable,” is not a compliment. Love gives itself but also holds itself back in freedom and dignity not to be violated. Too much certitude about doctrine violates God, who is not to be taken for granted, formulated, or fixed in a religion. God remains above all our statements about God.

That’s not to say that all statements about God are equal. Go back to my analogy. Not all thoughts about the writer of the love letters would be true to what he wrote your great-great-great-grandmother. As we should not presume to know God too well and so possess God in our knowledge, neither should we try to make God utterly unknowable so that no statements about God’s love for us or God’s will for this created world may be regarded as better or truer than any others. That kind of enshrined ignorance dismisses God as irrelevant to human life and to us. It’s just a negative way of settling the God-question that accepts, “Come no closer,” but refuses to hear God’s promise, “I will be with you,” and accept God’s caring and love.

The Bible’s raw material for the mystery of one God revealed to us in three Persons is relational. God loves, and God has always loved; indeed, love is God’s very nature. The Bible’s concern is also inclusive; it is reaching out to us. “As the Father has loved me,” Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “so I have loved you.” “Make your living space in my love.” Christ has opened up the Trinity to make room for us. Paul pictures our inclusion as a family into which we are adopted as daughters and sons.

So, what help do we find in this three-in-one talk about God here at the beginning of June 2009 in the midst of a terrible recession when it is taken as good news that the nation suffered a net loss of “only” 345,000 jobs last month? Remember, that’s a net loss. More than 345,000 people actually lost their jobs, but some jobs were added to the economy, too. Each of those who lost jobs is a person with a life, perhaps a family, and what maybe used to look like a career with a promising future. Why in such a time does it matter that God is one God in three distinct but inseparable Persons?

In your own human way, you are a distinct but inseparable person. Inseparable? From whom? From others who love you, from people you love or care about, from all who share in your life and you in theirs. You can't define yourself without them. Who would you be if you loved no one, cared for no one, and had not even memories of love and caring? To be an individual, absolutely alone and unmoved by others, is to be dead, even if your heart keeps beating. Yet, philosophers have often portrayed God as just such an isolated, self-sufficient and perfect Being, who needs no one and cares for no one. That portrayal could not be more wrong. "As the Father has loved me," Jesus says.

To God, you are not a data point, a statistic, a number, or a short-lived blob of protoplasm with significant shortcomings. People who love power have always wanted the essence of God to be power and glory. The essence of God is not power and glory but redemptive, self-giving love.

I said last Sunday that what I believe people in this world need to hear most clearly from us and experience from knowing us is that God cares. The Bible's raw material for our teachings and doctrines all tells us how greatly God cares and what amazing steps God has taken to make that caring work for the recovery, healing, and wholeness of the world and its people. Even today, when we seem hell-bent on making life as impersonal and statistical as possible, God makes our life and future extremely personal. The Son of God is one of us. God's own Holy Spirit indwells human beings, working within us and among us to keep us connected with God and enable us to share God's grace with others whether or not they know God cares.

We need to put humanity and life back into the good news Jesus Christ has entrusted to us. We need to be less sure of God and more trusting. We need to be less certain in our beliefs, more open to wonder, and more open also to people's life-experiences, questions, and doubts. Christianity needs to step back from the burning bush, take off its sandals with humility, but at the same time let God come closer and put more of our trust in God's promise, "I will be with you."

One God in three distinct but inseparable Persons is a mystery, not in the sense of a whodunit to be solved, but in the older, deeper sense of mystery before which can only stand in awe and wonder. But, it is not a mystery of power and glory. It is a mystery of love beyond our comprehension that will not stop reaching out to embrace us and our hostile, torn, fear-filled world. It is as though we enter the holiest of holies and stand before the throne of God but find, instead, a cross. And the ineffably sublime reaches out to us with understanding and compassion that are warmer and more human than we have ever known.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.