

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Trinity Sunday, June 19, 2011
Lessons: Exodus 3:1-8a,9-12a and John 14:7-21,28

TREADING ON HOLY GROUND

In any close, committed relationship, people who love each other need to maintain and sometimes re-establish a healthful distance from each other so that each continues to have a valid and vital, growing self to go on giving and sharing in the relationship. We need both closeness and some distance. Husbands, wives, children, parents, lovers, or best friends – all have lives of their own that enrich what they bring to the relationship. The self of the person who loves is shared with another but not consumed, stifled, or lost. In community, we can unite with others and share not only common purpose but also some measure of group identity which may become very important to us, but for the well-being of all concerned, we must continue to distinguish ourselves from the group and not lose our selves in it. There is an integrity of the self that is not to be surrendered to group-think. The extreme of group-think is an angry mob in which people do terrible things they would never have done on their own, but even respectable groups with worthwhile goals have a way of trying to regulate their members to conformity. Companies that cross the boundaries of ethics and perhaps of the law may develop a culture in which people get caught up so that, as in a mob, they do things they would not have considered or dared if they had not surrendered too much of themselves to the group.

Yes, relationships of love, friendship, community in various forms including religious community as well the culture of work do change us and develop us as people. I cannot be anyone all by myself because God created human life to be relational. Love and friendship are necessary to our being human, and commitment to the shared well-being of community keeps us from shriveling into dried-up selfishness. The dynamic realities of human life to which Christ calls us are relational – faith, compassion, justice, mercy, love. Even some experiences that may seem private are realized fully only when shared: hope, for example, or joy. Do I hope only for myself? Can I rejoice alone? Should my life be a party for one?

In order to share myself in love, friendship, or community (including the community of faith), I must have a self to share, and I dare not surrender myself completely to definitions imposed upon me by someone else. I must keep the distinct and living “I” within the bond of “we.” It is important for Christians to realize and understand that God does not take away our individuality as the price for loving us. Love appreciates the uniqueness of the person

loved and respects that person's freedom and integrity. God respects our freedom so much that God will not force conformity upon us even for our own good.

Once when I was in the store where I bought the puppets for the Children's Time in our worship, I came upon a book, supposedly designed to help in the development of Christian marriages, that I found disturbingly deceitful and manipulative. It pretended to speak to a young man preparing to marry by telling him what his young Christian bride wanted him to know about the marriage relationship, but it was so written that it was really telling the young woman what she should want and must want if she is to be a good Christian wife. Pretending to help him understand her, the book was really forcing her into a very restrictive mold. Love does not suppress the human soul; neither is Christian faith meant to imprison people in rigidly defined roles guarded on all sides by the threat of shame.

Now, what does my getting peeved in the puppet store have to do with Trinity Sunday and our understanding of the God who has come to us to restore relationship with us? That's what the doctrine of the Trinity, on the good side of the intentions behind it, was meant to be: a help to understanding the very human and personal way God has come to reclaim us in love. There was back in the Fourth Century and continues to be right up into the present a dark side of Trinitarian belief manifesting the will to power and dominion. But on the good side, the church was trying to help people make sense of *God in relation to us* for our salvation. The Bible never speaks of God apart from us, as though God could be examined as an object or defined like some *thing* we could evaluate, label, and master with our minds. I grimace inside when I hear people declare how God must be in order to be God. Suddenly, I'm back in the puppet store, only now it's God who is being hammered into a mold.

If it is true that the integrity of another human being who loves me is not to be violated, how much greater is the truth that God's integrity is not to be violated! Moses must not come too close or try to master his encounter with God, but having established the holy distance, God promises to be with the man through whom God will deliver the Israelites from slavery. Moses is prevented from getting a handle on God, but God does tell him the one thing he needs to know: "I will be with you." Shortly after the place where we stopped reading, Moses wants to know God's name, which would provide a handle, and the answer he receives in gentle rebuke may be translated as, "I Am Who I Am," or, following Martin Buber's lead, "I Will Be (with you) Who I Will Be (with you)." I like Buber's translation because it protects God's integrity while still affirming God's commitment to relationship, but either way, the warning is clear: *Don't try to get a handle on God*. We are called to respond in trust and trusting obedience, not to cram God into a box labeled "orthodoxy." The mystery of God's Person is not to be violated. It is not a definition of God that the Bible reveals to us but, rather, the wonder of God's love.

The Gospel of John leads us to understand in wonder that God loves even within the mystery of God's own Self, that God's own life is by nature relational. The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father. God came to us in Jesus Christ so that God could share life with us in relationship, drawing us into the love that has always been the nature of God's life. Let us be careful here because we are treading upon holy ground.

I remember a seminary professor telling us that one of the bishops on the winning side in the Trinitarian controversy back in the Fourth Century remarked that they, the bishops, were being compelled to talk about things of which they ought not dare to speak. They were examining analytically, philosophically, the very being of God and coming dangerously close to defining God. Getting it right doctrinally is not faith. As Christians, we do have beliefs which sustain and guide our trust in God's redemptive love, but really getting it right means sharing in God's compassion for this troubled world and its people. It is God's love we need to know and share; the mystery of God's being is holy ground.

It is a mystery how Jesus can say in the Gospel of John, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father," and even, "I and the Father are one," but then turn around and say, "The Father is greater than I." Definitions fail. Formulas don't work because God is Person, not theory, and the Person of God is not to be spelled out for our mastery and intellectual satisfaction. The human person who surrenders both pride and shame to trust but still in wonder can hardly process being loved so much by God, that is the one who is getting it right. God is not a puzzle to be solved, but Person to be trusted and to be obeyed in trust rather than out of fear of punishment. The wonder of God's coming to us is not power or majesty but self-giving, redemptive love. It is on the cross that we see the truth of God.

So then, we are invited to know God's redemptive love as it has come to us in the living, human person of Jesus. In him, we know what God is like in relation to us. We know, for example this morning, that God does not will the death of a nineteen-year-old girl but sees and feels in such grief the suffering and death of Jesus who is united with her. From him, we learn that God's own truth is redemptive love. He came to give us life and wholeness, not rationalizations of suffering and death. We are called and enabled to trust that God's own Holy Spirit is present to mediate between God and us, keeping the bond in freedom, so that God has an Advocate with us and we have the same Advocate with God, so we can trust that we are understood and held by God even when we don't understand life or ourselves. We are reminded to take God personally because God always takes us personally. At its best, Trinity Sunday reassures us that God is not a thing and we are not things, either, but persons loved and respected even as we are called to develop our true selves in relationship with God, with each other, and with the human community. At its best, the doctrine of the Trinity protects the holy mystery of God's being while proclaiming and extending to the world the wonder of God's love. Amen.