

Truth, Hope, Love

Trinity Sunday is another of those great, longstanding observances of the Church which is only sporadically celebrated in our less liturgical Baptist tradition. Although the designation of the first Sunday after Pentecost as Trinity Sunday is at least 900 years old, it doesn't seem to capture the imagination of most free-wheeling Baptist worship planners, pastors or laypeople. The Trinity, after all, is a difficult theological concept and seemingly one with few readily applicable lessons for daily life. And there are only so many times that one can trot out those illustrations about eggs, water and shamrocks.

You will not be getting a full-fledged treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity from me today. Instead, I'm going to stick with my previously announced intention of sticking with a focus on the Holy Spirit for the next few Sundays. And, unlike last week, I really am going to stick to pneumatology, the study of the Holy Spirit, rather than veering off into some other branch of systematic theology. But I might throw in a few things here and there about the Trinity because... well, that's just how I roll. And, because one can't really speak for very long about the Spirit without also speaking of the Father and the Son and, oh look, we're talking about the Trinity already. And, because the passages upon which I've focused my attentions this week are quite Trinitarian in nature. So, there it is.

Since this is part two of a sermon series on the Holy Spirit and I don't often inflict series on you, I thought it might be wise to take a page from our most common serial form of communication, the TV series, and remind you of what you've heard to date or bring you up to speed if you missed last week's episode. Last week, on the Feast of Pentecost, we considered the work of the Spirit as we see it in the life of the Church. We heard the passage from Acts 2 in which the coming of the Holy Spirit in power as a mighty wind and tongues of flame and the gift of speaking in foreign tongues caused the birth of Church, expanding the number of the followers of the Way of Jesus from perhaps a few dozen to over three thousand in one day. I spoke of how the Spirit not only empowers the Church as the Body of Christ but also how she binds us together in love. I also mentioned how the Spirit leads different ones of us and different groups in the Body in different ways, so that our spiritual unity is expressed through diversity; one Body with many members, each fulfilling different roles.

This understanding, which we have from Paul, of the diversity of the Body leads us to the practice of ecumenism which Good Shepherd Baptist has long practiced. As a group which continues to honor the historical beliefs of Baptists, we celebrate the autonomy of the local congregations with whom we nevertheless form associations. Not only do we gather joyfully with our fellow Baptists in the Evergreen Association, but also with other Christians of disparate traditions, mostly through organizations like the South Snohomish County Ministerial Association and the Church Council of Greater Seattle. Clergy and lay leaders from Maplewood Presbyterian and St. Thomas More Catholic Parish have been welcome guests in this pulpit and we've regularly worked side by side to help the needy with the Nazarene and Methodist churches who run the local food banks and with Trinity Lutheran, where the Emergency Cold Weather Shelter began.

We can trace the seeds of ecumenism back to Paul through the work of Augustine of Hippo, among others. Augustine is one of the giants of theology, towering over the rest of the post-apostolic era. Augustine was an Algerian bishop, living from 354 to 430 and best known for his

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autobiographical Confessions and his other great book, The City of God. I bring him up in this context because of his often cited quote about God and truth: “let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master...” Augustine wished his fellow Christians to see the truth that existed even in other religions, while rejecting their errors. Good Shepherd stands as a part of the Augustinian tradition in this way, as we regularly hear from or about other faiths in our educational programs. We celebrate the truths we hold in common with neighbors like the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, while still holding firm to our carefully formed beliefs which they do not share.

I bring this up in the context of our study of the Holy Spirit this morning because of what John reports that Jesus taught his friends about the Comforter, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...” Another of the theology professors at Southern Seminary during my days there and, like Wayne Ward, a fellow member of Crescent Hill Baptist with the Boyers, Molly Marshall says this in her book on the Holy Spirit, Joining the Dance: “...we can hear the breathing of the Spirit through these other ways of faith. It seems plausible to interpret the truth that is encountered as nothing less than the work of God’s Spirit guiding into all truth. Long ago, St. Irenaeus addressed this problem when he wrote, “There is but one and the same God who, from the beginning to the end by various dispensations, comes to the rescue of humankind.”” (Hmmm... Augustine and Irenaeus in the same sermon... Charlie, maybe we should talk about collaborating on a “Soup, Salad & Soul” series on the Church Fathers.) Dr. Marshall continues, “The Spirit is universally present in the world, bringing awareness of the ways of God to all persons of faith. Furthermore, the Spirit stirs hope among those who would deny having religious faith in the traditional sense. No one eludes the Spirit’s searching, awakening, drawing presence.”

I mentioned the late Rev. Dr. Wayne Ward a moment ago and he also wrote some helpful things about the way in which the Holy Spirit teaches truth. On the Greek word for truth used in this passage, Dr. Ward wrote, “its characteristic use in John’s Gospel is to designate what is “real,” “enduring,” or “genuine,” as contrasted with something that is transient or artificial.” Although $\alpha\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha$ “*can* mean what is true, rather than false, or right, rather than wrong,” the idea here is not of propositional truths which can be argued and proven but rather of the deep truths of God that God’s Spirit reveals to our own, those things that we know in the very fiber of our beings to be true. That these truths are, in the word Dr. Ward takes from Bauer’s Greek lexicon, “enduring,” suggests not only that they are lasting but that our learning of the truths of God will be a lifelong process. “I still have many things to say to you,” said Jesus to his friends, “but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...” And while we rightly treasure those enduring truths, we must continue to remember that we do not have *all* of God’s truth. Jesus still has many things to say to us. The revelation of God through the Spirit continues, long after the earthly ministry of Jesus. We must continue to listen.

Let there be no doubt that the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit is very much a part of Jesus’ ministry, however. Jesus said, “...he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears... he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” You may remember that this passage is a part of the great Farewell Discourse in the Gospel According to John, which we’ve been traversing for three of the last four weeks. Throughout these four-plus chapters, Jesus constantly returns to the theme of unity between himself, the Father and the Spirit. Jesus reminds the

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disciples that he has shown them the Father, that he has done the works of the Father, and taught them what the Father made known to him. He has also promised them that the Spirit, the Comforter, will continue this teaching and leading, from the Father, through the Son. As Dr. Ward wrote, “The Spirit has been One with the Father and the Son from before all time, through all eternity, forever and forever. (The Spirit’s) authority is not the authority of an independent spirit, commissioned by God to carry out a ministry; (The Spirit’s) authority is the authority of God (Godself).”

Jesus also says of the Spirit, “He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” This is also a part of how the Spirit teaches us the truth. There are, as we all know, parts of basic Christian doctrine that seem like complete nonsense when viewed without the lenses of faith: that a condemned criminal dying in a horrific manner somehow “saves” the lives of all people and the fate of the universe itself; that the same executed man was seen alive and well and mysteriously changed by his friends just days after his very public execution; that God is both one and three, one of those three being that same very ordinary man. Paul points to this reality in his first letter to the church at Corinth: “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” It is only through the declaration by the Holy Spirit of the deepest truths to the deepest part of ourselves that the work of Christ Jesus becomes glory rather than foolishness.

There is other work that the Holy Spirit does in speaking to the deepest part of ourselves. In the passage just prior to the verses in John which have formed the core of this message, Jesus tells the disciples that the Spirit will “convict the world of sin.” We are made fully aware of our brokenness by the work of the Spirit within us. The Spirit’s work is like that of a fully awakened conscience, what Abraham Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.” But we must also remember, if this makes the Holy Spirit sound too much like a prosecutor, that Jesus called the Spirit the *παράκλητος*, the Advocate – our advocate before the throne of God, and the Comforter. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul talks about the mysterious way in which the Spirit prays for us, God Godself entering into us and praying for us to Godself: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

This is perhaps the most amazing work of the Spirit within us and, coincidentally, leads us back into a further consideration of the Trinity. Dr. Wayne Ward wrote in his little book, The Holy Spirit, regarding the work of the Spirit to communicate the things of Jesus to us, “The really shocking thing... is not that everything in the being of God is shared fully by Father, Son and Spirit. The almost unbelievable truth is that, through the Spirit of truth, this divine reality can be shared with us!” To more fully illustrate what I think Dr. Ward was getting at here, let me turn to... an illustration! On the cover of your bulletin this morning is reproduced the famous icon from the Russian Orthodox tradition, Andrei Rublev’s “The Holy Trinity.” Dr. Molly Marshall mentions it in her book from which I quoted earlier, Joining the Dance. Reporting that a copy hangs over the desk in her office, she writes, “As I have prayed before it and meditated on its depiction of communion, I have felt the pull of the Spirit drawing me into the Trinitarian

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hospitality it portrays. Although the three figures lean toward one another in love and attentiveness, there is an open space. It is as if the beholder is invited to pull up a chair to the nearside of the table in the foreground and enter the intimate conversation.”

As I've said here previously, although some time ago, the overarching metaphor of Dr. Marshall's book speaks strongly to me. The metaphor, as revealed in her title, is the dance, specifically, the perichoresis, or circle dance of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It has been a model for Trinitarian thinking since the fourth century, initially proposed by Gregory of Nyssa and later refined in the eighth century by John of Damascus. John uses the term to signify his concept of the internal relationship of God, that all three persons of the Trinity mutually share in the life of the others, so that none is isolated or detached from the actions of the others. This certainly rings true with the Gospel we have from his namesake which we've been discussing this morning. But let's take the metaphor on its own terms for a moment, as many writers have done. Ultimately, this dance of God is not, as at least one writer has suggested, a pas de deux between Father and Son with the Spirit providing the music. Nor is it a trio. In the greater plan of God, the perichoresis is a quadrille, a dance of four partners – our Source, our Brother, our Comforter and fourth, the Bride of Christ, the Church, ourselves.

We are invited to cut into this great dance, the perichoresis of the Trinity, through God's great love for us. Just as each member of the Trinity loves and is connected to the others, so God reaches out in love to us and offers us connection. I believe this is what we can learn from the verses I read as we began from Paul's Letter to the Romans: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." The Holy Spirit, that third person of God who dwells within us, is the funnel by which God pours God's love into us, cracking open our hearts of stone and making it possible for us to hope to share in the glory of God, the glory of Christ Jesus.

This hope will not disappoint us, no matter what our situation. Not only do we have the promise of God upon which to base our hope but in Jesus we find that God has brought into Godself all the pain and struggle of human existence, hallowing even our suffering so that it, too, can become an occasion for hope. For if, as Jesus told his disciples in that Farewell Discourse recorded by John, "The Father and I are one," then we can be assured that God was present in Christ in Jesus' hour of greatest need. And we can therefore be assured that God is present through the Holy Spirit with us in our hour of greatest need. No situation we can find ourselves in is ever truly "God-forsaken." Let me be clear – our Loving Creator does not cause or rejoice in suffering. But when suffering occurs, God is there, God-With-Us. Therefore, says Paul, "we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us..." All because the Holy Spirit has brought the love of God into our lives.

There are many, many ways in which the Holy Spirit works in our lives. I thought today to direct us mainly to another sort of Trinity in truth, hope and love. But the truth is, and I hope you know it, that the love that we talk about here at Good Shepherd Baptist is never a passive love, never a love that stands back and lets events roll on, never a love that says, "go in peace, be warm and filled." The love we teach and seek to practice is always the active, self-giving love that Jesus modeled for us. This is the love that the Spirit of God calls us to as she declares to us

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the things of Jesus, the things which Jesus received from the Father. As we are invited into the life of our triune God, as we are welcomed to the table of the Holy Trinity, into the quadrille of perichoresis, the blessed and loving dance of life, we, in turn must invite others in. We can do this, in good old fashioned Baptist evangelical style, by giving verbal witness to the love we have found in Christ Jesus. That is right and proper. And we give witness by our actions, doing the will of God so that others may see our good works and give glory, as Jesus said, to our Father in Heaven. We are called to love as we have been loved, providing for both the physical and spiritual needs of others as we have opportunity. In all of these things, we will be empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who both comforts and challenges us, the Spirit who is both gentle, brooding dove and fierce, restless fire. May our hearts be open and our hands and lips be ready for the dreams, the visions, the decisions and the actions which the Spirit prompts in our lives. Amen.