

Mystery and Mandate
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – May 30, 2021

Please read:
Isaiah 6:1-8
John 3:1-17

Leo Tolstoy tells a story of a bishop sailing the seas who heard of three hermits living on an island. He wanted to teach them how to pray and so he visited them.

'We do not know how to serve God. We only serve and support ourselves, servant of God.' 'But how do you pray to God?' asked the Bishop. 'We pray in this way,' replied the hermit. 'Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us.' And when the oldest hermit said this, all three raised their eyes to heaven, and repeated: 'Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us!'

The Bishop smiled. 'You have evidently heard something about the Holy Trinity,' said he. 'But you do not pray aright. And so the Bishop began explaining to the hermits how God had revealed God-self to humanity; telling them of God the Father, and God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Bishop then taught them the Lord's prayer. Once he was confident that they had mastered it, he said goodbye. As he left that night, they stood on the beach repeating the Lord's prayer over and over, until he was out of sight.

A while later, as he was sailing home, suddenly he saw something white and shining, on the bright path which the moon cast across the sea. Was it a seagull, or the little gleaming sail of some small boat? The Bishop fixed his eyes on it, wondering. The steersman looked and let go the helm in terror. 'Oh my! The hermits are running after us on the water as though it were dry land!'

When they got to the ship, they cried out to the Bishop, 'We have forgotten your teaching, servant of God. As long as we kept repeating it we remembered, but when we stopped saying it for a time, a word dropped out, and now it has all gone to pieces. We can remember nothing. Teach us again.' The Bishop crossed himself, leaned over the ship's side, and said: 'Your own prayer will reach the Lord, men of God. It is not for me to teach you!'

On this Trinity Sunday, I rather feel like that Bishop. Who am I to teach you about the Trinity? Every year, Trinity Sunday moves us into the season of Pentecost, what many traditions call "Ordinary Time." This "ordinary time" is in fact where most of our lives are lived, where we learn and live out our discipleship as followers of Jesus. There is wisdom, then in beginning this time with Trinity Sunday, as I believe only as we understand and enter into the mystery and fellowship with the Triune God, will we be able to live as faithful Christians.

This weekend combines a complex constellation of memorials and ideas. Today is Trinity Sunday, but this is also Memorial Day weekend. This week is also the 100th anniversary of the terrible Tulsa Massacre, the bombing of Greenwood, a Tulsa suburb known as "Black Wallstreet."

The doctrine of the Trinity (as elusive as it may be) may help us reflect on what's going on in our world, as I believe the Trinity is the most important teaching about God the Christian church has to offer the world. I approach this topic with humility, as any sermon on the Trinity is what my English Literature professor reminded me about an essay: at best, it is an "attempt." Suffice it to say the Trinity stirs in me the profound mystery of what we read in I John, that "God is love."

This doctrine of God's being and character reveals loving relationality, or community to be at the very heart of God. Christians believe you cannot understand the essential being of God without believing in the revelation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we can't understand or believe in Jesus Christ without the Holy Spirit's breathing faith, hope and love into the church throughout the ages. However, we may formulate our understanding of this Triune God, you cannot think or try and speak meaningfully about one "Person" of the Trinity without taking into account the other two "Persons" of the Trinity.

I like how Richard of St. Victor (1110–1173), a medieval philosopher and theologian, put it, "For God to be good, God can be one. For God to be loving, God has to be two, because love is always a relationship of giving and receiving. The real breakthrough comes that for God to be joy-filled and happy, God has to be three. Delight comes from two together enjoying and rejoicing in the same thing at the same time. It is like new parents loving their new child that they cannot stop admiring. The love then flows in an eternal circle instead of back and forth between two. Each of the three takes their part in revving the engine of desire and delight."¹

Our Gospel lesson is the famous story of Nicodemus. There is mystery even in the setting of this encounter, as Nicodemus approaches Jesus at night. You will note that the Triune God is implicit in this story, with Jesus reminding us of God loving the world, the call to believe in Jesus as God's only son, and the Holy Spirit who gives new life.

The passage is full of paradox. Jesus turns the table on Nicodemus and reminds him that the Spirit blows where he wills. Jesus reminds us we can't control God. God is not manipulated. In order for us to experience the Kingdom of God, we must be born again. This can also be translated as born "from above." There is intentional ambiguity in Jesus' language. The simple and obvious fact is that we cannot do redemption ourselves. We are called to believe in Jesus but being born again and being born from above is the work of God in our lives. This is a great comfort to me, as it releases us from the performative pressures of religion.

Here is the heart of the gospel, that "God so loved the world that God gave God's only begotten Son, that whoever *believes* in him might not perish, but have eternal life." Jesus doesn't say here that whoever *acts religiously*, or whoever *obeys the ten commandments*, or who *volunteers* and *gives generously* will not perish. No, he says whoever *believes*! It's that simple... It's that splendid. It is important to understand God's motivation: *God loves us!* "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

God's heart is all about loving redemption, and the invitation is clear: to believe in Jesus brings salvation. Which is the paradox Trinitarian faith. We are welcomed into the fellowship of God by pure grace, but we are also invited to live out this fellowship which means loving our neighbors and seeking their salvation as well. We know intuitively that the question that is put to the prophet Isaiah is also put to us, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

¹ Richard of St. Victor, *The Trinity*, book 3, chapters 14–15. trans. Grover A. Zinn (Paulist Press: 1979), 387–389.

Which brings us to Memorial Day... I will always argue that war is never good. Too often times we fall into the trap of confusing honoring our veterans and heroes of war with honoring war itself. In my reading of scripture, I believe the purest form of Christian faith calls us to be “pacifists” in the sense that we are always called to choose the way of life and peace. In fact, some of our family members and friends, many of our ancestors, have given their lives to secure peace for us and to protect our free society. Though warfare may be evil, there is such a thing as noble sacrifice in the midst of warfare, and I believe that is what we aim to remember and honor on Memorial Day; those who have given the “ultimate sacrifice” so that we and others around the world might enjoy the freedoms we enjoy and too often take for granted.

Which is really the opposite of what we commemorate on the 100th anniversary of the Massacre of Tulsa. I never learned about this tragedy growing up, not even in my university studies. But it’s part of our history. On the morning of May 30, 1921, a young black man named Dick Rowland was riding in the elevator in the Tulsa Drexel Building with a white woman named Sarah Page. The details of what happened vary from person to person. The accounts of what happened circulated among the city’s white community during the day became more exaggerated with each telling.

Tulsa police arrested Rowland the following day and began an investigation. An inflammatory report in the May 31 edition of the *Tulsa Tribune* spurred a confrontation between black and white armed mobs around the courthouse where the sheriff and his men had barricaded the top floor to protect Rowland. Shots were fired and the outnumbered African Americans began retreating to the Greenwood District. In the early morning hours of June 1, Greenwood was looted, burned and bombed by white rioters. At least 39 people were killed (later estimates put those killed at 100-300), and hundreds were displaced from their homes and businesses.

As shameful and embarrassing as this moment in US history is, we cannot forget what happened then, and the continuing racism that plagues our society now. Strides have been made, but 100 years later we still are struggling with systemic racism. The one-year anniversary of George Floyd and all that has ensued in this past year reminds us there is much work to be done to ensure that all people – whatever their race or sexual orientation – that *all* people enjoy “the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

We all have choices to make about what kind of community are we building and maintaining. The fact is, our life together will reflect the kind of God we worship. If we worship a God of violent power, a God who tolerates killing of Enemies, then we will have a society that tolerates violence and the killing of our Enemies. Sadly, too many of us are tempted to glorify power, violence and warfare. That explains at least in part why we are buying more guns than ever, and how gun violence is becoming normalized in our society.²

You’ve heard it said you reap what you sow. Well, you become what you believe. And if you bow down to a violent God, you will have a more violent society. If you bow down to a God of war, guess what, war becomes good and a measure of greatness.

² Neil MacFarguhar and Edgar Sandoval, “Texas Lawmakers Move to Drop Most Handgun Requirements,” (*New York Times*, May 25, 2021). Note how owning a gun is tied to a “God-given right to self-defense...”

The God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus invites us to turn away from hatred and violence, and invites us to the way of love and peace, into loving community, self-giving community, a community with grace as its foundation; not condemnation, but forgiveness and salvation.

In just a moment, we will celebrate the sacrament of baptism for little Everly. The sacraments are what Calvin called “visible signs of an invisible grace.” As we remember, as we confess, as we gather around for sacred remembering and celebrating, may we might recommit our lives to the way of peace. This is what the people of the Triune God do, and what gives us hope.

Perhaps like those three hermits, you are already engaged in miraculous prayer, and creative, loving redemptive work which brings new life for others, forgiving sins and giving of yourself that others may live. Keep on doing what you are doing! Or perhaps, you realize that God is inviting you to believe and enter into a new and deeper fellowship and more generous discipleship. Wherever we are in our spiritual journey, the Trinity prayer by George Herbert is a good way for us all to pray and live:

Lord, who hast form'd me out of mud, And hast redeem'd me through thy bloud, And sanctifi'd me to do good; Purge all my sinnes done heretofore: For I confesse my heavie score, And I will strive to sinne no more. Enrich my heart, mouth, hands in me, With faith, with hope, with charitie; That I may runne, rise, rest with thee.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen!