

The Trinity and Truth

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June 12, 2022 (Trinity Sunday)

Romans 5:1-5 and John 16:12-15

Today is called Trinity Sunday, the final Sunday in the liturgical year before we enter a long season of what we call “ordinary time,” not that the Sundays are ordinary, by any means, but that they are ordered, ordinal. (It’s also called “farewell to Ken Lovett Sunday around here!) Trinity Sunday is the rare liturgical day named not for an event – like Pentecost or Good Friday – but a concept, in fact, *the* central theological concept, the doctrine of the Trinity.

The word itself, Trinity, appears nowhere in the Bible. Its understanding does, however, so, in fact, I think it’s more helpful to understand the Trinity as a way we experience God in our faith and life rather than a way we understand God in our intellect.

The lectionary passages typically assigned to this Sunday do that. Paul’s letter to the Romans, along with affirming that it’s faith, and not any work of our own doing, that secures our relationship to God, references God, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus, in John’s gospel, shares a self-understanding of his own divinity and then calls on God the Father and anticipates the coming of the Spirit. Trinity as experienced, holistic, not simply an exercise of the mind.

We spend tons of time trying to explain it to our children, which means we spend lots of time trying to understand it ourselves. How can this be? We love metaphors and images. The three-leaf clover, one thing with three distinct parts. Water in three forms – water, ice, steam, yet all still water. If you Google “images for the Trinity” you will be amused. You will also know you’ve slipped into the world of theological nerdiness, not always the best place to be, let me tell you.

Think, rather, about how you have experienced God – the grandeur of creation, the incarnate closeness of Jesus, the still, small voice speaking in your ear, nudging you along. That is the Trinity, more the air of faith that we breathe than the doctrine of faith that can confuse or confound. It is how we experience God in diversity and unity; it is how the Triune God is alive and active in the world, made

manifest in height and breadth and depth, in ways both familiar and beyond our comprehension.

Jesus tells us of one way this happens. “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” this nation’s founding document declares. “You can’t handle the truth,” Jack Nicholson’s character barks to Tom Cruise’s character in “A Few Good Men.” “In a time of universal deceit,” George Orwell said, “telling the truth is a revolutionary act.” “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,” Jesus said. He also said, “I am the way and the truth and the light.” Pilate asked him, in a telling moment in his sham of a trial: “What is truth?”

On this Trinity Sunday, when Jesus articulates an understanding of the Trinity, he does so by affirming what the Spirit, the third person of the Trinity in traditional language, does. “When the Spirit of truth comes,” Jesus says, “he will guide you into all the truth.” That is to say, we have the truth available to us, whether we know it or not, whether we can handle it or not, whether – with Pilate – we recognize it or not.

In just a few moments we will ordain and install new officers for this congregation. Many denominations ordain; one uniqueness of ours is the understanding of three ordained offices – deacon, elder, minister – co-equal, each and all with distinct and critical tasks.

When I ask questions to our almost elders and deacons in a few moments, one will go like this: “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?” That is a mouthful. See how well I do in a bit when I ask it.

We don’t have a laundry list of what those “essential tenets” are. In our history, whenever we’ve tried to boil it down to a few things, we’ve gotten into trouble. There is, however, a good summary in our Book of Order, in something called the “Great Ends of the Church,” produced in the early 1900’s. Not a litmus test, but a vision. “The great ends of the church,” we affirm, “are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.”

We like that list, although sometimes we get caught up on one of the six – “the preservation of the truth.” Whose truth, we wonder. Who are we to say what truth is?

Well, Jesus says the Spirit will lead us into the truth. That seems so fragile right now, when our culture is so at odds with itself, when not only can't we agree on much of anything – what is truth? – we can't agree on how to discuss it, and so we demonize, villify, those who disagree with us, and hunker down in our own versions of the truth, closed to other possibilities, closed, even, to the possibility of being led to a new and deeper truth. “The Spirit will guide you into all the truth,” Jesus – the second person of the Trinity – says. Do we believe that? Can we trust it?

Sports can be a diversion. And sports can be a lens, a window. I am not a golfer. I grew up in Jack Nicklaus territory and so am a follower. I use golf telecasts to accelerate my Sunday afternoon naps. Every so often when I watch the Masters or British Open, I think “I can do that,” and head to the driving range, an experience that offers good therapeutic value and a subsequent sore back.

You may have read this week, on sports pages and beyond, about the formation of a new golf entity to compete with the current one. Without getting in the weeds, this new one is financed by Saudi money, and lots of it. In a very awkward press conference this week, golfer after golfer was asked about this – about accepting money from a government that was anti-women, anti-LGBTQ, a government that was, per our government, responsible for the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. No golfer had a compelling answer to that question – the subtext was the huge amounts of guaranteed money that they were receiving.

One, however, speaking what was undoubtedly on many minds, said something to the effect that “I am a golfer, I am not a politician.” I am a golfer. I am not a politician. It is easy to criticize such a response. It may also be easy to relate to it. That's above my pay grade, we say. That's complex, we say, referring to things like immigration or climate change. Leave it to the experts. And we do nothing, shrug our shoulders, or turn a blind eye. I am a this, or that, or a minister. I am not a politician.

“The Spirit will guide you into all the truth.” Do we trust it? Can we believe it? Can we rely on it as we live our lives, make our decisions, take our actions? On June 12, 2016, six years ago, a 29-year-old man killed 49 people and wounded 53 more

in a mass shooting at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Do you remember it? It happened on a Sunday. In Rochester, we gathered at a local church for a prayer service. I offered a prayer, if I remember correctly. A friend of mine, an Episcopal priest, read the 49 names. It was heart-breaking, senseless gun violence magnified by homophobia.

Names have been read in these weeks – 10 in Buffalo, all black, killed while shopping for groceries. It was heart-breaking, gun violence magnified by racism.

Twenty-one in Uvalde, Texas, two adults and 19 precious, precious, precious children. Heart-breaking.

Because we love Jesus, because God loves the world so much, and because the Spirit will guide us into all the truth, we cannot say that “we are golfers; we are not politicians.” We cannot. We cannot claim that it’s above our pay grade to think about immigration, or climate change, or homophobia or transphobia, or gun violence. We cannot shirk our responsibility because an issue is complex, or we think it’s complex, or that it might generate controversy.

Or, stated differently, how can we claim our calling, our mandate to engage the world fully, to discern the truth together and to live into that truth.

There may be honest disagreement on some things, or different approaches. But on some things, fundamental things, the truth is clear.

We believe that we are made in the image of God, the *imago dei*. And since we believe that, we can in no way support, or ignore, beliefs or practices that distort or diminish that understanding for any fellow child of God, including LGBTQIA siblings.

And since we believe that Jesus is the Prince of Peace, Jesus who said that peacemakers are blessed, reflecting a tradition that tells us to turn swords into plowshares, how can we not be shaken to the core by shooting after shooting, the ones we read about in the headlines that quickly fade from our attention span or the ones that happen each day in this city’s streets that garner so little attention.

We needn’t be politicians – and in fact it’s perhaps better that we are not – to understand these truths. The bigger question is what do we do?

You can find a million criticisms of the phrase “thoughts and prayers” these days, and I understand that. But I wonder what it would look like for us to take that seriously, earnestly, faithfully? What would it look like to couple thoughts and

prayers with the affirmation that the Spirit will guide us into all the truth? Where would our thoughts take us? More than a cursory sadness, but rather deeper thoughts, honest reflections, placing our own thinking alongside what we might envision, imagine, the truth to be.

What would our prayers look like, sound like, feel like? Where would they take us? Prayers for healing and comfort for victims, yes, to be sure. But active prayers, searching and longing prayers as well.

Maybe it has always felt as if we live in perilous times; it certainly feels that way now. I won't rehearse the litany. But I wonder, and I hope. I wonder and I hope that as we welcome new members and new leaders, as we move from pandemic into whatever is next.

And one thing more. I am not sure who said that "truth without love is brutality, and love without truth is not really love at all." The Spirit will guide us into all the truth. I believe that. With that, I believe that the Spirit, and the Spirit's trinitarian partners, will guide us into all hope, and peace, and grace, and love. Amen.