

This Grace in Which We Stand
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. William D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
May 30, 2010
Trinity Sunday

The Sermon Text: Romans 5:1-5

(NRSV)

¹ Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us..

The Sermon

This is Trinity Sunday.

As you likely know, to explain the Trinity in terms that all of us can understand, is no easy task.

In fact it is such a daunting task that in seminary we were taught that the wisest thing a pastor could do on Trinity Sunday is to arrange to be out of the pulpit.

I apparently failed to heed that particular word of advice, because here I am, and I don't have the privilege of saying to whomever might inquire about the Trinity, "Go ask your mother."

Fortunately. However, I can turn to the Apostle Paul, and this morning's sermon text, for begin to answer.

Per Paul, we who were not born into the Jewish faith, would not have access to God's embrace if we did not have a Savior. Fortunately we do – and that Savior is none other than God's Son Jesus, the Anointed One – the Christ.

Listen once again to the way Paul expresses this:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ

That is the Good News folks – that we have access to God through Christ.

There is, however, a "but" which neither Paul nor anyone else can escape. And it is a huge obstacle to the faith of many throughout the history of both the Hebrew people, and the Christian church.

That obstacle has a fancy theological name – Theodicy – a word that comes from the combination of the Greek words theos (meaning God) and dike (meaning justice). To seek to make a complex problem at least somewhat comprehensible, theodicy addresses the question of how a just God can permit the world the just God created, produce so much evil, pain, and suffering. Or, as Rabbi Harold

Kushner expressed it in his best-selling book of a few years back, Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

The Apostle Paul knew that question was being raised by the newly converted Gentiles, and his inspired response introduces us to the third person in the Trinity, namely the Spirit of God. Let's listen once again.

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There you have the Trinity as Paul is describing it in the Book of Romans.

Does this explain everything we need to know about the Trinity? No!

St. Augustine -- so the story goes (probably apocryphal) was really struggling to understand the Trinity, how we say we believe in only one God but profess God the Father, and God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. So he went for a walk on the beach.

He saw a little boy digging a hole in the sand with a seashell and then running to the ocean, filling up the shell, and rushing back to pour it into the hole he had made. "What are you doing, my little man," Augustine asked. "I'm trying to put the ocean in this hole," the boy replied. And peace came to Augustine's soul as he realized that this was indeed what he had been trying to do... to put God into his mind completely...not possible...

As Lutheran Pastor Tim Zingale put it in his sermon on this passage:

The Trinity sheds light on God, much light, but the mystery still remains...we can never contain God in "holey" doctrines, no matter how deep and wide... yet they help us to see and be able to share with others who we have discovered God to be, what God has chosen to reveal...

God the Father is God ABOVE US...the creator, sustainer of all that is...the Holy Other..."Our Father who art in HEAVEN, HALLOWED be thy name..." "Thy glory is far above the heavens," Ps 8 sings to us...When I hear God the Father, I remember to look up, that I am not alone, that God knows and loves me. There is much to see if you keep your eyes up.

God the Son is God WITH US...taking on flesh and blood, taking on the human condition, experiencing all we experience and more, so that we might rested assured God knows all we go through...yet the Son is also divine...

the Son reveals to us what God is like and what God calls us to become...
And God the Spirit is God IN US...dwelling in our hearts and minds, giving us
an intimate connection to God and to one another...empowering us to be
God's people and continue the work of Christ in the world.

Still sound confusing?

It is for a good reason, because it is seeking to explain the unexplainable.

But isn't that the human way of going about things? Hasn't it always been this way? We humans have, it appears, a need to explain all the unexplainable things in our lives. It's how we are wired.

A two-or-three-year-old child will curiously explore her surroundings, picking things up off the ground and putting them in her mouth - or other openings, like ears, nostrils and so on - testing them to see if they're the same today as they were yesterday. You and I do the same with God.

As we grow in years we begin to think we can accumulate enough knowledge to control those things in our lives that seem uncontrollable. In homes where there is tension between parents, you'll likely find children who will seek some way to call attention to themselves. This is the child's way of controlling a situation that is confusing and uncomfortable.

Of course, this child's manipulation of events can take several forms. The child may choose to bury his nose in a book, drowning himself in the pursuit of knowledge, thinking knowledge will give him an upper hand; or he may spend every waking moment devoted to sports; running, wrestling, rock climbing or placing other strenuous demands on his own body in order to show he's in control.

Some kids choose to control their own world by dressing or grooming themselves in a way that calls attention to their bodies: look at my green hair, my pierced nose, my baggy pants, and so on. And, yet others choose less healthy, life-threatening ways of trying to cope with the unexplainable.

I think you and I have a lot in common with these children.

Why? Because in our relationship with our creator, we want to understand all we can - and more - about the one who formed us.

Further, in this way, you and I are no different than our first parents, so well known as *Adam and Eve*.

So it was for all our ancestors in the faith those many centuries ago. They tried, to the best of their ability, to explain how God interacts with creation.

They wrote the Athanasian Creed in the 7th c. A.D. - published it for all to see, and hear and memorize - hoping their writings might provide answers that would quench humanity's need to take control over God. The writers hoped, by their efforts, to put forth a final explanation of who God is, so that people would stop offering so many DIFFERENT explanations.

Of course, the controversies didn't stop. In fact, even more arose because of the Church leaders' writings. But, since the statement was formally adopted as a norm by which to judge all other possibilities, the Church thought they had taken control of the situation. The Church felt secure that it finally had the answers, and it wouldn't listen to other possibilities. The Church, to remain a vital institution had to maintain a certain degree of decorum in order to retain its identity as an institution initiated by the savior, Jesus.

But, through the centuries, the Church discovered different ways of life than the early leaders had ever experienced. The Church was made aware of scientific explanations for the way the world works. The Church had a choice: either retreat into dogmatism - "my way or the highway" type of mentality - or keep an open mind and explore each option against its corporate memory of how God has always acted in the world.

In today's world, we can see the results of that important choice. You and I worship in a Presbyterian and Reformed tradition. The reformer John Calvin encouraged people to keep life in good order, but not to be afraid to question, argue or debate the issues.

Calvin was a man of his time: bigoted, chauvinistic, and a creature of habit. Yet he encouraged his followers to question basic facts of life, to explore their options in the ways they might deal with others in the world, and to think for themselves.

I'm grateful for the freedom of exploration that comes with the Reformed Tradition. By contrast, I grew up in a tradition that exercised much more control over how we were to think. I could not return to such a tradition today without great injustice to who it appears God has created me to be.

I find many soul brothers and sisters who need such freedom as well. At the same time, it seems that those who desire such freedom of thought are in the minority today, as the fastest growing churches, and those that are the largest, tend to be much more conservative. I guess in all the uncertainties of today's world, a majority of those in the United States who choose to attend worship, desire to have their theological and lifestyle choices more precisely defined.

Yet I remain convinced that no creed, no dogmatic assertion by a particular denomination, no pronouncement from an established ecclesiastical leader such as the Pope, or the Bishop of another order, has all the truth. But I would never assert that figures such as these, with their enormous burdens of office, take their defining roles lightly. Their perspectives deserve our careful attention and reflection.

But I also relish the freedom, as a person of faith and as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), to seek to make sense of concepts such as the Trinity for myself. And I'd like to share some of those concepts for your consideration and reaction.

In my own worship of a Trinitarian God, I prefer to think of the three dimensions of the Trinity as three ways in which we *experience* the divine presence in our lives and in our worship.

- At times we experience God as being clearly transcendent, totally awesome, and one in whose presence there is the feeling of the need and desire to bow, to remove one's sandals, or to prostrate oneself. This could be considered an experience of God the

Creator, God as Father, God as "other." The great Jewish theologian Martin Buber, described an encounter with God as I/Thou. In Buber's experience there was no way in which we would ever confuse ourselves, the "I", with God, the "Thou."

- At other time we experience God comes more in the sense of God as a comforting companion beside us -- God as one of us. We sense that this presence is sufficiently different from us so as to be fully capable of being redemptive, sufficiently different to show a new way to live and move. This is God Incarnate, Immanuel, God the Son, Jesus the Christ.

- Still another experience many of us encounter is that of God within -- within individually, but maybe even more within collectively -- in other words God as Spirit.

In each case it is God that is being experienced, just as an individual does not become less oneself in experiencing him or herself in relationship. I don't cease to be myself when I become parent to my daughter, or when I become mate to my wife, or when I am literally or figuratively "sitting at the feet" of a master preacher or biblical scholar. I do not cease being me, and yet the nature of my own experience of myself changes in these varying circumstances, as does the experience of others in relationship to the "me" that I am consciously or unconsciously enacting in that circumstance.

In Romans, chapter five, verses one through five, we have heard Paul -- who as a devout Jew would have been radically monotheistic, and as a convert to Christianity no less so -- refer to the Trinitarian formula or model that infused his understanding of the faith. He expresses this understanding in a concise rendition of the meaning of grace as opposed to law. When under the law, it is obedience to the law that renders one righteous and acceptable to God.

Paul and the other early Christian writers found a freedom in Christ to move away from the law, but in a manner that acknowledged the reality that we find our way in this world darkly, often blindly. In spite of our stumbling, bumbling quest, we have faith that somehow God is with us even in the darkness, even in the blindness.

In agrarian times a psalmist wrote, "The Lord is my shepherd." In modern times the monastic Thomas Merton wrote:

O God I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have the desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.