Trinity Sunday / Memorial Day Weekend

Prayer: In the quietness of these moments O God, startle us by your presence. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing your work we may know Jesus the Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Trinity is a word that has always seemed more strange than scary, says Kathleen Norris, and I tend to agree. I remember Sunday School teachers of my youth struggling to explain how three separate things were really one in the same. And while I didn’t understand what they were describing at the time, the spoken Trinitarian formula in worship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or as it sometimes gets expressed today, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, became familiar language very early on in my religious experience. I suspect the same is true for you.

Today is Trinity Sunday which is always the Sunday after Pentecost. The first five verses of the fifth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans mention the three persons of the Trinity. Don’t think for a moment, however, that in writing this letter Paul had a clearly worked-out Trinitarian theology. That isn’t how it works. Doctrines develop over time—a long time, and they are based on experiences people have with the divine and how they come to understand and express those experiences.

This doctrine began to develop as people’s experiences with Jesus, and then with the Holy Spirit, led them to think and speak about Jesus in ways normally reserved for God. They addressed Jesus as Lord and addressed him in their worship, and in time, they needed to account for their behavior.

And since the earliest Christians were Jews who were uncompromising in their monotheistic faith, how were they to explain their devotion to Jesus and their experiences of the Spirit? The result, and it took centuries to work out, is the doctrine of the Trinity, which isn’t necessarily found in scripture, all spelled out as a nice neat formula. But the elements are there and the end result is understandable, based on the experiences of those early Christians in scripture. Doctrines develop based less on rational reasoning and instead, because of human experiences.

Now, describing personal religious experiences is not easy. Perhaps it’s not even possible to explain intensely personal experiences with God, or sacred or divine encounters. We feel inadequate. Language fails us and we’re afraid of sounding unintelligent or like we’re babbling about something silly. And describing and talking about religious experiences is extremely awkward, particularly for well-educated Presbyterians. We like our religion practiced decently and in order, while religious experiences can be lacking in order and even downright irrational.
So I’d like us to consider this morning that the doctrine of the Trinity describes not so much a formula as it does a feeling. A sense—a deep penetrating sense based on real human experiences, that from the beginning have moved people far beyond that which we are capable of understanding, let alone describing.

In Alice Walker’s book *The Color Purple*, the sharp-tongued Shug, who, as a character, evolves and becomes more sympathetic, says at one point,

> I believe God is everything...Everything that is or ever was or ever will be...My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree my arms would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run around the house. I know just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can’t miss it.

What she’s talking about, what I’m talking about is that powerful sense that we just somehow know we are a part of something much larger than ourselves and beyond our ability to comprehend fully.

In considering the ways in which both art and science provide opportunities for wonder, Albert Einstein once said,

> If we trace out what we behold and experience through the language of logic, we are doing science; if we show it in forms whose interrelationships are not accessible to our conscious thought but are instinctively recognized as meaningful, we are doing art. Common to both is the devotion to something beyond personal, removed from the arbitrary.

In other words, there are mysterious and scientific connections undergirding our lives that are well beyond us and that can only be expressed in art and poetry—what religion knows as truth and embraces as our ultimate hope.

I mean, it’s an interesting thing, don’t you think, to ponder how each of us has coursing through our veins a salty stream in which the elements of sodium, potassium and calcium are combined in almost the same proportions as sea water?

I sometimes wonder if the central doctrine to the Christian faith, the doctrine of the Trinity, is a mystery that invites us to imagine that which we cannot adequately describe? Because I am convinced that the reality is this: The doctrine of the Trinity, like most doctrines of the church, is more a way of preserving a mystery than explaining one.

And yet despite our not knowing, our not fully comprehending, we are encouraged to boast in our hope, according to Paul. Now, I was taught that you aren’t supposed to boast
about anything—that it’s in bad taste to boast. But this isn’t boasting in our own accomplishments. This is boasting in what God has done for us.

We are to boast in our being justified and therefore, the hope we have of sharing the glory of God. The hope that we are loved—that God’s love has been poured into our very hearts by the Spirit. The hope that our lives, that we as human beings, are a part of something larger than ourselves—beyond our existence here. Something altogether wondrous and mysterious and compelling and so real that on occasion we’ve felt it and we’ve tasted it.

And Paul, in this brief portion of his long letter, documents for us the birth of hope. It is a process that we move into of being able to boast in our sufferings rather than wallowing in them. Paul says that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

And think about that for a moment. Hope isn’t something easily attained or cheaply clung to. Hope is that place inside of you that for whatever reason, refuses to die. It’s that thing that even after years of waiting for the letter to arrive, still causes you to walk each day a little faster toward the mailbox in anticipation.

Hope is the quiet confidence deep inside of you that despite the ways in which your world seems to be crumbling around you, you are somehow able to remain calm and sure because you know you’re not alone. Hope is the assurance that Paul will describe later in this same letter when he says that,

> For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, no things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (8:38 & 39).

And Paul can say those words not because he read them in a book or heard someone else proclaim it. He can say it because he was living, breathing proof that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. He knew what it was to suffer on account of his faith. He understood better than most, that loyalty and devotion to Jesus Christ and to living like he lived, costs you something. It has to. It requires sacrifice and our very best effort. It requires cross-bearing which is never easy.

On this Memorial Day weekend, when we remember and honor the fallen who sacrificed so much of themselves, many of whom made the ultimate sacrifice for people they never knew in places they’d never been and on behalf of causes they didn’t fully understand but where their devotion to country and its ideals was never in doubt. We’ve seen first-hand how suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and how character produces hope.
When you’ve been severely tested and have suffered on account of your faith and have emerged hopeful, it’s that hope that gives you the confidence to boldly say, “I don’t know what my future holds but I know who holds my future”…and let the chips fall where they may.

As people of faith, we arrive at hope because the rational, temporal world doesn’t offer it to us in the same way our faith offers it to us. And I would argue that for Christians, the Trinity is not so much a doctrinal formula used to fully explain the mystery of God as it is an attempt to explain the ways in which we experience and relate to God, who it turns out is relational in nature. And so all of the analogies of three being one, like water, steam and ice being different forms of the same thing—none of those analogies work very well in the end.

Rather, the Trinity and its relational nature, is a powerful symbol that our wildly diverse community uses to hold it together. On Pentecost it’s what held the Parthians and Meads together. It’s what enabled the Elamites to be understood by the residents of Mesopotamia. It’s what holds our Bible together with its two different creation accounts and four gospels, each of which has a unique and different way of telling the story of Jesus and his life. It’s what holds Christians together despite our different interpretations and practices. And it’s what allows us not to come undone knowing that yes, Presbyterians of good character may differ.

What the Trinity helps us understand that we would otherwise have difficulty comprehending, is that through personal, human experiences with God down through the centuries, we have come to understand that there is no single Lord in heaven who rules everything as a temporal ruler would. Nor do we mean some sort of cold power of providence who determines all yet remains unaffected by anything. The triune God is a diverse, social God, rich in internal and external relationships.

That’s been humanity’s experience with God. That’s our story. It’s a living story and continues to unfold and be written.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.