

“Wading into Mystery”

In the church calendar, today is known as Trinity Sunday. After Epiphany, in which we recognize the all the ways in which God the Father has been manifest in our world throughout history, and Easter when we celebrate the salvific action of Jesus rising from the dead to offer life to the world, and Pentecost, at which we give thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit among us, empowering us to continue God's work on earth, today we celebrate all three together. This is the Sunday on which the church asks us to meditate on the great mystery of our faith - three holy persons of the Godhead held together in perfect unity as one God, the only doctrine in our faith that is truly unique to Christianity. Consequently, it is the Sunday that most rectors hand off preaching duties to their more junior associates or seminary interns, the Sunday on which priests wish they had paid more attention in their theology classes in divinity school, and the Sunday parishioners wished we could move on to a topic more relevant to their daily lives. I know it, you're thinking it, so we might as well name it upfront. But we can't just move on, and we can't skip over it, and we can't choose other readings, because it is the core of our identity, the one thing on which all others rest in our faith, so let's talk about why it matters.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the thing that makes God God, and you and me not God, and it is the most beautiful thing our church can proclaim in the world. Augustine of Hippo, the most prolific church father, said he liked to think of the Trinity as being these three – the lover, the beloved, and the love that binds them together. Each distinct in its own right, but without any of those three the others wouldn't actually exist, they wouldn't be meaningful or make sense. You can plumb its depth of that relationship forever and you will never hit bottom. You can contemplate it for a lifetime and you will never comprehend it. It is the mystery that assures us that God is infinitely bigger than you and me, because if you could completely grasp it in your finite brain then God would be the small thing enclosed in the confines of your mind and you would be the big thing holding God captive, and that can never be.

It reminds me of a story that a friend of mine tells. She was a professor, who loved to teach poetry, and one time she had the chance to meet the poet laureate of the United States. She had been studying the work of this particular poet named John Ashberry, who is notoriously difficult to grasp, so she thought she would ask the poet laureate, an obvious expert in the field, for some help. So she walked up to him and said, "I'm having trouble understanding Ashberry's poetry, could you give me some pointers?" And with apparently a bit of disdain, he replied, “Do you have to understand the water to wade into it?” I don't approve of the tone, but I will echo the sentiment here. You could know all about the chemical composition of water, about viscosity and the weak bonds that hold the atoms together, but it wouldn't make a bit of difference if you had never swam in its vastness, never felt the refreshing coolness in the summer, never been hit by the power of a wave or felt the pull of the undertow. If God as Trinity is a relationship of eternal and infinite love, then you can't explain it, you have to feel it. Ours is a faith that you experience to understand, that you participate in in order to really know.

I would never discourage anyone from trying to better understanding God, but at some point, the only way to know anything that matters about God is to simply wade into the relationship. God must be experienced more than comprehended. We must dive into the mystery of God's love to understand it. We must splash around in it, enjoy it, learn to be at home in it. We need to jump in with reckless abandon like a little kid in her arm floaties knowing that she is safe and simply wanting to play, because above all a relationship of love is meant to be fun, and refreshing, and joyous. And in church we should be making that relationship a knowable reality.

In that loving relationship, creation, including humans like you and me, were never meant to be an other, an outsider. I don't think God wanted to talk about us as them. There was only meant to be an us. The impulse of love is to pull others in. To be inclusive rather than divisive. To be creative rather than destructive. That is what our gospel passage is trying to tell us, what Jesus wants Nicodemus, and us, to really get. On this Trinity

Sunday our entry into the great mystery is through the most familiar, and most accessible of Bible verses: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Jesus came so that we might not be excluded, but rather pulled in to that bond of the lover, the beloved, and the love that binds them.

Beautiful right. I could stop there, and some of you might be wishing I would, but bear with me for another minute, because I think there is a deeper lesson to us here, and maybe one that is more important for us at this communal stage of our lives as a church. Simply experiencing God's love yourself is not what this passage calls for. Jesus did not just come into the world for you or me - that would be egocentric and not reflective of what Jesus was demonstrating here. The reading is about God coming into the world to save the world. And nothing less

God created the world through love - the love between them became so great that it had to have an outlet and the world was born, and now God is drawing that creation in, redeeming the world through our participation in that love. God became human, not to condemn all humanity who didn't live up to the standard of Jesus, but to invite everyone in to the great mystery and inner life of love in the Triune God. The purpose of Christ was to open the door for our participation in the eternal community that is God. And in the greatest sign of God's faith in us humans, God empowered us with the Spirit to recreate the world with them. That is our job here, to help recreate the world to reflect God's love, by helping others to jump in with reckless abandon to that joyous love. Understanding that mission is of utmost importance as we imagine a way forward as a church, listen to what God is calling us to, dream of a future together.

Our goal is not to make our church the best church it can be. I think that is often our impulse, but to be bluntly honest, it is not a goal worthy of the triune God. That would be representative of a god who was completely satisfied with the love shared within the circle of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and never reached outside of it. But the Bible, not to mention our very existence here, tells us that is not true. God was not content with that. The generative power of that love was too great. And so a reflection of God's life in us has to be expansive, generous, and creative. It must reach far beyond our walls to pull others in to this life-giving experience, to change our world for the better and make God's kingdom evident among us.

Let me use the analogy of working on your home. You may need to update some things on your house. You might need to add some energy efficiencies to reduce bills and make your home more sustainable. You may want to build a deck to increase your home's value and provide a place for your family to enjoy. Those are all good things. They may be responsible, necessary, and even commendable things. But don't tell me that working on your own home is how you are living out the biblical mandate to love your neighbor. Loving your neighbor is making your community a better place for all to live. Where everyone feels safe and has the basic things they need to live a full life. Where every child can receive a quality education. Where the elderly are not shut away in their homes lonely and forgotten. Where a feeling of neighborliness is manifest in an almost tangible way that permeates the community.

Setting goals for our church is the same. There may be things we need to do to our church home - some deferred maintenance, both literal and figurative, that should be taken care of. And we will do those because that's our responsibility. But it's not our mission, and it must not be confused for it. Our mission must be broader. It needs to manifest God's presence to all around us, to reflect Christ going into the world in order to save it, to draw people in to the Spirit of infinite love that can be known in this place.

More than twenty-five hundred years after the prophet Isaiah, the voice of the Lord is still calling out, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And God is waiting for us to answer, "Here I am Lord, send me." Send me into my workplace, into my school, into my neighborhood to make your love known; send me into that situation in this city that so clearly needs the hope of God's presence; send me to those people in our community who so desperately need to be welcomed into the fellowship of God, and I will make you known there Lord, I will bring your kingdom and invite others into your gracious existence. We will help you recreate the world to reflect your eternal love. This is what it means to participate in the mystery of the holy Trinity. We will make

sure our community knows the love of God and is called to participate in it. That is a goal worthy of the triune God. That is a mission that mirrors the God who came into the world not to condemn it, but to save it. So together, over these next few months, we will discern how best to live into that calling, as individuals and as a church, and how we will bring others in our greater community into that life, so that they too can fall endlessly into the depths of this love where they can never hit bottom. That, my friends, is good news. That is a life worthy of the gospel. And that is what Trinity Sunday is really about. Amen