

Trinity Sunday

7 June 2020

Author Liz Curtis Higgs writes about a conversation she had with her young daughter Lillian on the subject of religion. Liz first asked, “Who rules the universe?” Without hesitation, Lillian replied, “God does.” Next, Liz asked about Jesus, and Lillian answered, “They work together.” Time for the big one. “What about the Holy Spirit?” Liz asked. “Without batting an eyelash Lillian replied, ‘Oh, He works on weekends.’” (in her book *WHILE SHEPHERDS WASHED THEIR FLOCKS*, p. 73)

One year after Trinity Sunday, a couple emailed me the next day to tell me about the conversation they had with their second-grade daughter at the table that Sunday afternoon. In the midst of their conversation, they discussed my sermon. Emily chimed in, “Oh Father John’s sermons, they’re always the same. You know....blah, blah, blah.....love.....blah, blah, blah.....love.” And I thought “Hey, that little girl really got it – the message, the repetition, the core.”

And so it is with the Holy Trinity. Over and over again....blah, blah, blah, love.....blah, blah, blah, love....” God the Father/Creator – I love you and give you life. God the Son/Redeemer....I love you and embrace you in that love forever. God the Spirit....I love you and warm your heart and your soul with my love....”

So a warning – my preaching on the Trinity is going to be blah, blah, blah, love. You can go to sleep now. You got it!

NO! You know I love three points – this is a feast day that was made for me to preach! First, our image of God has a great deal to do with our image of ourselves – and our world. I’d like to see if we can tease this out a bit today. The doctrine of the Trinity is saying that God is not only stranger than we think, but stranger than we CAN think. Perhaps much of the weakness of the first 2000 years of reflection on most of our doctrines and dogmas is that we’ve tried to understand them with a logical or rational mind instead of through love, prayer, and participation itself. This is how God brilliantly remains in charge of the whole process. In the end, only LOVERS seem to know what is going on inside of God. To all others, God remains an impossible, distant, and uninteresting secret, just like the mysteries of our universe. (adapted from Rohr, posting of 5/12/2015)

Without prayer, which then means without love, it is easy for religious folk to operate from a view of God that is punitive, shame-based, exclusionary of ‘wrong’ people (however we alone decide to define it), or anything that justifies the status quo --which just happens to be keeping us on top socially, economically, or religiously. We start by thinking that’s what religion is about – maintaining order and propping up society. We end up seeing God as a glorified Miss Manners.

Once we idealize power and being on top, we tend to emphasize the almighty, all-powerful nature of God, who is made into the Great Policeman in the sky to keep us all under control (or at least everybody else under control). Which leaves us totally unprepared for Jesus. He becomes a scandal and a disappointment. He’s not about power or control or maintaining the status quo.

And now we see how revolutionary God’s truth, revealed in Jesus, really is. Suddenly we have a God who is anything but a police officer. This God finds grace for those who break the law and finds life and freedom among the lepers and the sinners who do not have good manners. This is now an upside down universe (Acts 17:6). I am sad to say most Christians have yet to participate in this Divine rearranging of our

world. Witness the current debates and protests about the death of a young black man at the hands of white police officers. Our reactions to all of this reveal where we are coming from. If we are filled with indignation – then we are coming from a place of power and privilege. We don't want anyone to rock our comfortable world. If we are coming from a place of love – we are begging for a deeper heart of compassion and love. Same is true for our reactions to the Pandemic. Are we indignant that our comfortable little worlds have been rocked – or are we learning that most of the world spends their entire lives struggling with this kind of insecurity – about food, water, and health? A heart that prays – a heart that loves – a heart that lives in the mystery of a Trinity of Persons in love – wants to heal, not inflame. To embrace, not push away. To forgive, not condemn. To reconcile, not divide.

Mature religious people, that is, those who develop an actual inner life of prayer and outer life of service, tend to notice that we can cherry-pick anything we want in the Bible to justify our dominance/power positions. The Bible is merely used as self-serving information and ammunition against others. It actually would be better if we did not read the Bible until we undergo a conversion.

Only converted people, who are in union with both the pain of the world and the love of God, are prepared to read the Bible with the right pair of eyes, which is from the side of powerlessness and suffering instead of power and control. This is foundational and essential Christianity 101: The Greek word METANOIA, poorly translated as 'repent' in the Bible (Mt 3:2, Mk 1:15), quite literally means 'to change your mind.' Until the mind changes the very way it processes, nothing changes long term. "Be transformed by a renewal of your mind," Paul says in Romans 12:2, which hopefully will allow the heart to soon follow. (Rohr, posting of 4/2/2016)

Second, we can't get bogged down and too serious about dogma. The greatest theologians and mystics didn't. They used playful language and imagery as they wrestled with the doctrine of the Trinity; they knew they would never understand God – only love Him/Her. St. Bernard of Clairvaux said "If we are right to think that the Father gives and the Son receives the kiss, we do not err in thinking that the kiss itself is the Holy Spirit." How often do we think of our relationship with God as a kiss? Meister Eckhart wrote "When God laughs at the soul and the soul laughs back at God, the persons of the Trinity are begotten. To speak in hyperbole, when the Father laughs to the Son, and the Son laughs back to the Father, that laughter gives pleasure, that pleasure gives joy, that joy gives love, and love gives the Persons of the Trinity of which the Holy Spirit is one." How often do we think of God as laughing? Too often we've thought we have to be miserable and stiff – with long faces and dark laces – to be holy. That's nothing like the holiness of God! And one more. John of Damascus, one of the early church fathers, didn't care for all the calculated reasoning about the Trinity, and came up with a wholly different term for the oneness and threeness of God – perichoresis, from which we get the word 'choreography,' meaning 'circle dance.' How often do we think of the Trinity as dancing together in love?

Third, we'll never understand the Trinity, just like we'll never understand God. And that's the mystery – and the beauty – and even the fun of it! It's an endless well from which to drink pure, life-giving water. In a letter to a friend, Flannery O'Connor suggested, "Dogma is only a gateway to contemplation and is an instrument of freedom and not of restriction. It preserves mystery for the human mind." The only worthy response to the mystery we celebrate today is prayer. It could be said that explanations are perhaps of less importance than experience. We know God as Trinity not through any mental gymnastics (however complex) or through purely intellectual reasoning (however astute). Our knowledge of God as Trinity is made possible BY GOD, who has chosen to be revealed as Mother, Father, Son and Brother, and as living, loving Spirit. As Parent, God has brought forth the created universe and even our very selves. As Son and Brother, Jesus has

made known a God who hears our cries, who cares deeply for us, who counts the hairs on our heads and who loves so passionately as to become one of us, to suffer in love for us, to die that we may live. As Spirit, God remains with and within us. These are the experiences of Trinity; these experiences become known in prayer, they are solidified and made real through what we do – how we love our neighbors, especially the poor and needy.

And so I end with the words of Julian of Norwich: “And so in our making, God almighty is our loving Father, and God all wisdom is our loving Mother, with the love and goodness of the Holy Spirit, which is all one God, one Lord. And in the joining and the union He is our very true spouse and we His beloved wife and His fair maiden, with which wife He was never displeased, for He says: I love you and you love me, and our love will never divide in two.” (Showings)

Blah, blah, blah....love.....blah, blah, blah, love....blah, blah, blah, love.....AMEN!