

Peace at the Last

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
May 22, 2016
Trinity Sunday – Year C
Romans 5:1-5



“God loves you.” That’s what I should have said.

The children came down the aisle for the children’s sermon that Trinity Sunday much like our children did today. I should say the child came down the aisle. It was a light early summer crowd in the little church I served in rural Tennessee as a college student. The only child was four year old Toby. It was my first Trinity Sunday there, and given that it is the only Sunday of the Christian year that deals with a doctrine, I wanted to get it right. So when Toby came up, I was ready.

“Toby, today is Trinity Sunday. Do you know what the Trinity is?” Silence.

“Well, the Trinity is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Three persons, one God. It’s kind of like this triangle.” I held up a card with a triangle on it.

“You see, it has three sides. We can imagine this side is the Father, this is the Son, and this is the Holy Spirit...” I was pointing to the various sides; Toby was pointing at something he was seeing outside the clear-glass windows of the sanctuary, a bird I think. I was losing him. That’s what I thought then. Now I know I never had him.

But I had the perfect illustration, the one I knew would get his attention. A bottle of water.

“You see this water? It can take the form of steam or ice, as well as water. So, Toby, God is ice, Jesus is water, and the Holy Spirit is steam. And now you may go back to your seat or to the nursery downstairs.”

He walked down the aisle to meet his nursery teacher and they disappeared downstairs. I had just solved the central mystery of the Christian church’s theological reflections for over two millennia right there in that little church in the woods of Middle Tennessee.

After subjecting the entire congregation to this same irrefutable logic, many of them came out thanking me for helping clear up this vexing doctrine that previous pastors had said was so difficult and making it seem so easy. I left later that day and headed back to college thinking to myself that I had finally found the Trinitarian answer in water, steam, and ice. My logic was airtight. And, of course, that is the problem. There's nothing more dangerous to the faith than air-tight logic; logic so hermetically sealed that the wind of the Spirit cannot break through.

The truth is that the nursery worker, playing on the floor with Toby, embracing him when he needed comforting, providing him with food and warmth and joy had done more to teach him about the Trinity than my triangles and water ever could.

That's what I should have said to Toby – “Today we are talking about the Trinity. And what that means is God loves you so much, in so many ways, that we need a bunch of words to say it, and even then we cannot say it all. Isn't that amazing?” That would have been enough.

Paul struggles with the same problem. He's a logical guy. Brilliant, gifted with words, precise in his thinking. In his first letter to the Corinthians, for example, he executes an astounding analogy between the church and the human body, calling the church the body of Christ and pointing out in exquisite detail the ways the various parts of the body work interdependently and need one another like the members of the church need one another. He lays out the proper order – first apostles, second prophets, third teachers...a place for everything and everything in its place.

But then there are these other moments, moments when Paul's logic appears to break down, moments when he seems to lose himself. And these moments often follow right on the heels of those more logical ones. Right after he gives that brilliant analogy of the church as the Body of Christ where everything and everyone has a place he moves, in Chapter 13, to a less than confident resolution. “For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part...for now we see in a mirror, dimly.”

It is as if Paul follows his logic as far as it will take him, and then he remembers the road to Damascus and the blinding light and the voice from heaven and Jesus calling him, and he breaks out into doxology, praise of his own ignorance, praise of the faithfulness of God that breaks out of every boundary.

He has spent a good deal of the first four chapters of Romans trying to help his listeners in the church at Rome understand that there is none righteous, no not one. He

paints for the Romans a rather bleak picture of a world bent on sin, broken beyond recognition.

After describing a world held fast by sin, in bondage to decay, beset by powers and principalities, he proclaims that we now have peace with God through Jesus Christ, through whom we have access to this grace in which we stand. And then Paul reaches for the noisiest word, the most exuberant word in Greek that he can find. Standing hip-deep in this grace found in Jesus Christ, we “boast,” he says, in our hope of sharing in the glory of God. This word in the Greek means to rejoice or exult, not “boast” in the sense we think of it. It is a joyous word.

And here he says, “Not only that...” That’s what you say when the next thing you’re going to say is even more astounding than the last. “Not only that...” He will even boast in his sufferings, since suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured out in us in the Holy Spirit.

If you asked Paul about the Trinity, he would have told you about Jesus Christ, who makes peace between us and God, whom we know because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. I suspect he would have laughed at water, ice, and steam, he would have been puzzled by our triangles, and he would have been endlessly amused by all the fighting that has occurred throughout two thousand years of Christian history over precision of language and small differences in interpretation. I think he would have reminded us, perhaps in one of his illogical bursts of praise, that love is the thing.

When couples come to me for premarriage counseling, we always start with the same question. “Tell me how you fell in love?” Sometimes it is a startling one for them. They have been hip deep by then in wedding planning, which is usually the first big test of the resiliency of the relationship. They have come in sometimes expecting that we will discuss the service. Sometimes they think we’re going to start with me asking about their past, their childhood. Perhaps they think I’m going to give them ten ways to create a healthy marriage.

But that’s not the place to start. Some of that will come later. But first, I want to know how they fell in love, why they remain in love, and what it is about the other person that they fell in love with. If a couple cannot answer that question, none of the other ones matter.

Paul cares little about triangles and water. The Trinity for him, if it is anything, is not a formula, but a fierce love that has come to us, sought us out with a love so deep we cannot find words to describe it.

That's what I should have said to Toby. God loves you. So you can boast, you can rejoice, in all things, because God's love will never leave you or forsake you.

And likewise for us. We come on this Trinity Sunday, perhaps filled with unanswered questions about this doctrine that has vexed the church for two thousand years. And God responds by setting a table, bread and wine, body and blood, for you, for me, for the world. God loves us, God loves the world, and that is enough for peace at the last. Come and dine. Amen.