

THE PURPOSEFUL GOD

John 3:1-17

To suggest that the Pentecost experience represents the end of the creation of the church is to ignore the record of the generations that followed. Though led by Peter and Paul, the people of The Way found themselves in a time of development that was both various and uneven. Early gatherings of the followers of Jesus were replaced by those who found themselves in a time of persecution by Rome. Several generations would pass before the time of Constantine and his proclamation that Christianity gained recognition by this same Rome. Following adoption by many, the Christian people found it necessary to begin to interpret beliefs to a wider population. Even the pagan emperor looked to the church to become more standardized, more harmonious so that it could be a stabilizing element within the empire, for the benefit of all, but mostly the emperor.

It was the emperor himself who called church leaders together to begin to discern and display the theology and doctrine of the church. As the bishops and many others gathered in Nicaea (located in today's Turkey) several issues were placed before the council with the expectation that its decisions would solidify the church's grasp of power within the culture. Of most concern to the emperor was the date for Easter. Having initially aligned itself with Passover, it became clear that the irregular calendar of the Jewish tradition created a sense of concern among the more orderly Romans. The council decided on a new way to calculate Easter, a formula that is continued to be in use, at least in the Western church. Orthodox churches adopted a slightly different formula which often establishes its Easter a week or more different from the more common celebration.

A second more complex discussion---or to be fair, dispute---erupted over the relationship between God and Christ. The council ended with a creed that attempted to describe how it is that God and Christ are unique and yet the connected. At its conclusion, the council not only rejected the viewpoints of some, it also had them excommunicated from the church and banished to the margins of the known world with copies of their writings burned. It required several more generations before the work of this council found an expression in the tradition of trinity. This idea attempts to suggest that the nature of the creating God is revealed in God's Christ and is given power through the Holy Spirit. The church continues to verbalize this formula, even beyond the formal creeds that expressed faith.

Today is recognized as Trinity Sunday as a way of expressing that the God we would wish to know is revealed in continuing creation, in the life and teaching of Jesus, in the work of Holy Spirit. It offers itself as a summary of the way of God, this God who yearns to be known by all. It proclaims that the creating of God is not finished, that Jesus has come to connect the divine with the human, and that the Spirit is present in power to connect the human with the divine.

With this doctrine of the trinity before us, we can turn to the gospel offered today. If the Christian community were to be polled as to the verse in the New Testament that is most familiar, it would be found within this reading. We remember that Martin Luther characterized this passage as the “gospel in miniature” and yet closer reading would reveal more truths than can be contained within the popular few verses. To expect any few verses to bear the whole gospel is to do injustice to the Bible itself.

Throughout scripture, we learn of the purposeful God, One who envisions peace through justice and compassion as an expression of love. God’s vision and God’s work are a result of God’s grace, a perspective that is fluid and flexible based on both the purposes of God and the need of God’s creation.

To say that God is purposeful is to challenge the notion that God has a plan, a specific plan, rather than a vision. Creation is much more a dynamic, flexible response to need than some unalterable, step-by-step instructions to produce some pre-determined outcome. But creation is, in the terms of gospel thought, moving toward kingdom, not empire of Caesar but Kingdom of God. God’s purposes will prevail though any plan may have to be changed or even set aside in favor of these purposes. God is not so much an architect of the universe as God is and inventor of life, abundant life, eternal life. God responds with grace rather than force. Love is the foundation for God’s work and for God’s peace..

And it is to be the standard for our activity as well. Though predeterminism is entertained by some, particularly by those who count themselves favored by God, chosen from among all God’s children, set aside for power and glory as well as honor and privilege. It may be comforting to conclude that God has a specific plan complete with dates and events, experiences and results, but the idea of free will challenges this idea. Rather than any particular recipe for peace, Christ offers us perspectives rooted in love of God and love of neighbor, however this love may be expressed. Practices of faith are not designed so much to fulfill particular requirements for salvation so much as they are offered and undertaken to open us to the

creating God, the reconciling Christ, the redeeming Holy Spirit. We are more molded by God's Spirit than we are constructed, "changed from glory into glory" in the words of hymnwriter Charles Wesley.

The better-known verse John 3:16 is followed by another verse that describes the purposes of God for all people. John 3:17 reads: "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." The purposeful God is intent not upon forsaking the world but upon embracing it so that it would come to know God's saving grace.

It is the creating God, the resurrected Christ, the present Holy Spirit---the Kingdom's trinity---that calls us in this age. God equips us well through signs and wonders of God's creating presence, through the witness of Jesus of Nazareth, through the guidance and empowering of the Holy Spirit. We can expect, with all that has been both promised and provided, that we can be sufficient to the opportunities to love if we will be but look both to the needs before us and the talents with which we have been blessed. Both taken together will require a flexibility of mind, body, and spirit that seeks to offer good news and to build kingdom. Just as Christ found a variety of ways by which he might heal and redeem, so we too are challenged to imagine the many ways by which we will respond to God's call to serve.

We may lament our seeming inability to relate to the younger generations. But lament will not fulfill God's purposes, although such wailing and gnashing of teeth, to use Matthew's image, may cause us to seriously consider how the way forward might look. Two graduates of Harvard Divinity School have spent significant time studying unaffiliated millennials, the name assigned to young adults. They discovered early on that this generation gathers around dinner tables, in gyms, on trains, and in other unexpected situations, but significantly not in churches. Though often raised in church, synagogues, and mosques and children of religious parents, this generation may seem to reject religion in favor of spirituality and become the "nones" of our era, nones being those who when asked about association to religious institutions answer "none".

Though seemingly rejecting the church of their parents and grandparents, the pair observing the formation of new communities discovered quickly that all these gatherings "share a commitment to creating a space for belonging, service, and spiritual practice. They all invite their participants to see themselves within a greater whole and to devote themselves to the common good." [Paulsell, Stephanie, Faith matters: How millennials gather, *Christian Century*, May 9, 2018] Perhaps these young

people are not nearly so self-absorbed and disconnected as their use of technology might suggest. Though walking down the street with eyes cast down, preoccupied with i-phone, this generation may be observing more than we think, though such observations are often through the tiny screen before them.

Are their purposes much different from previous generations? Are their ways of forming consistent with those offered by the church of this age? Though more akin to earlier generations than might be admitted, these young people make connections in different venues than the church may offer. We may have to depart from the church building and program in order to engage young people where they congregate. Our invitation to come and see may need to be replaced by initiatives to go and engage, humbling listening rather than arrogantly preaching.

The expectant hope is that new congregations can be formed although these gatherings may not have all the trappings currently associated with church. Though unwilling to join, most are still eager to connect with others in ways that lead them beyond themselves and into the wider world--- a world we would proclaim can become God's kingdom. A new church start in Denver is centered in a city park. Though directly across the boulevard from a very traditional United Methodist Church, this ministry simply sets up shop where people gather. People are engaged in conversation and occasionally prayer. Others come to enjoy a meal together and sometimes Holy Communion. Some come to serve those in need. Others offer themselves in music and dance and drama. They gather and then disperse, looking forward to another time to together to "reconnect to self, society, "the natural world, and the divine mystery that draws us beyond the boundaries our own lives." [Ibid.]

Trinity Sunday can be represented by a combination of the greening of God, the golden crowning of the Risen Christ as Lord, and the welcoming of the fiery Spirit. What it surely declares that God has provided what is needed for us to be the church. Will we not only receive but also respond, with Christ ever before us, God within, and the Spirit urging us onward? Thanks be to this God, this God in three persons, blessed trinity, Amen.