

God: The Feeling That Remains Where the Concept Fails

From the series: Credo

*A Celebration of the Music of the Church and Thirty Years of John G. Bryson
As Director of Music and Fine Arts*

Isaiah 6:1; Revelation 1:17

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Christ Community Church
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Trinity Sunday, June 10, 2001

Transcription of the spoken sermon

It was a number of months ago that I chose this Sunday on which to celebrate the life and the ministry of John Gregory Bryson and to share together in community the finale of his tenure with us. I did it intentionally because this, on the church calendar, is Trinity Sunday, and we have gone 'round the cycle once again, moving from Advent through Christmas to Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Eastertide, Ascension, Pentecost, and then this Lord's Day which is celebrated in the larger Church as Trinity Sunday, a Sunday in which we celebrate that God who is the deep Mystery, the Guide and Ground, the Source of all that is, from which all flows, that Mystery that is God revealed to us in the incarnation of the Word in the face of Jesus Christ, present to us and with us and in us in the Holy Spirit - God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit - one God blessed forever. That is the theme and the focus of this day, Trinity Sunday.

It is a proper day in which to focus on the worship of the Church, and this community, the life that we have shared together for over a quarter of a century, almost three decades, as a worshiping community in word, in sacrament, in music and artistic expression, worshiping that deep Mystery of our lives revealed to us in Jesus, present to us in the Spirit. I chose Trinity Sunday because our Director of Music and Fine Arts, whose final appearance in that position is today, has been drunk with God from a child. God has been the passion of his life.

It was my privilege some years ago to visit his boyhood home. He wasn't there and so his mother let me in on all the secrets. She took me from the basement to the attic, and in the basement there, undisturbed, like the room of a deceased mate in which nothing is touched, there was still the little pulpit and the dossal cloth and the school desks that were the pews, and the little organ. Some children play ball. Some children play school, but Greg played church. And, fortunately, he found playmates that would sit obediently in the pews as he led worship. Now, you see, I tell you the truth - he has been intoxicated with God and God has been the passion of his life from the very early years, and thus it is Trinity Sunday in

which our worship, moving through the drama of redemption as we have it in its historic story and the scriptures, comes to its culmination, this God who is the one whom we worship and acknowledge as the Source and the Ground, the Guide and the Goal of all that is.

Greg's passion for God, coupled with natural endowments of artistic giftedness, found expression in artistic expression. It is the aesthetic dimension of life in which that passion finds its fascination and its beautiful expression. Thus, throughout all of his life, he has been drawn to worship very naturally, because of who he is, because of the giftedness with which he was graced, because of that passion that could find expression only in the worship of that ultimate mystery, indeed, the eternal God.

In the early years when Greg was with me, I didn't fully appreciate that aesthetic dimension which is so critical for worship that elevates the soul and the spirit. I, too, was a child warped from the womb. I just about matched him in oddness, for as a child I would bring a little notebook to church and I would note in that small notebook the text of the sermon and the three points, for in my childhood experience, the sermon always had three points. I think it's probably an adolescent rebellion that I am always certain that my sermons have no point at all. But, I would come home and at Sunday dinner, to the great pleasure of my father, would recite the text and the three points, my three older sisters, never being able to match me at that point. But, you see, as a child it was likewise, an intoxication with God, for me, not in aesthetic expression but, rather, in rational understanding. I shudder to think of the times that, even as an adolescent, I wrestled with questions of predestination and free will, reading the facts and mysteries of the Christian Faith by one of the fine theologians of our tradition, always trying to understand, always trying to figure it out, for I was steeped in that Reformed tradition of Dutch pietism which sought always rationally to explicate the faith. Mine was an intellectual quest, even as a child, a quest for understanding. And that which was sought so diligently was the literal and absolute truth.

And then there was a moment in my experience when a light went on. I was at a seminar at McCormick Seminary in Chicago in the mid-70s and it was a seminar at this Presbyterian school on the Apostles' Creed, and they invited a Lutheran theologian, a great old scholar, Joseph Sittler, and in his address on one of the aspects of the creed, he made a statement as an aside, but for me, it was not an aside, it became luminous, flooding my whole being with light, for he said, "You know, you Presbyterians, you always come at it through the head, whereas the Catholic tradition comes at it through pageantry, through color, through touch and smell, through all of the fabric of that rich worship experience of the Catholic tradition." In that moment I knew that I had been on one track, it was the track I learned from the Heidelberg catechism. There is a question and answer in that catechism which says, "Why will not God have God's people taught by pictures and images?" And the answer is, "Because God will have God's people taught by

the lively preaching of the word." And that had been my whole tradition. That had been my whole experience. There had been none of the aesthetic, none of the artistic. It had been a word-centered, rationally, intellectually delivered systematic presentation of the faith, whereas, as Sittler spoke of the richness of the Catholic mass, entering a cathedral, a Catholic church is like entering a warm womb, and suddenly I saw that there was no need to choose between the lively preaching or the richness of the pageantry, the symbolic artistic expression of the faith, and it was from that moment on that I began consciously working intentionally with Mr. Bryson in the creation of a tapestry of worship that used all of the artistic expression available while not discounting the articulation of faith in preaching. That's been the story of over a quarter of a century of worship at Christ Community.

But, I had to learn that my intellectual quest was not enough. I had to learn the statement which I quote as the title of this meditation from a German theologian, Rudolf Otto, who says in another throwaway line, "The feeling that remains where the concept fails." The feeling that remains where the concept fails. So much of my earlier experience was in terms of concepts, seeking to bring understanding, rational understanding, seeking intellectually to grapple with God, and I had to come to understand that God will not be intellectually managed. It is impossible to come to the fullness of the experience of the mystery of the sacred and the holy in rational categories. Finally the concept fails. Finally one hits a brick wall. Finally one hits the ceiling. There is nothing more to say. There is nothing more to think. But, when the concept fails, there is a feeling, there is a sense. It is the sense of a presence. It is the experience of the sacred. It is the recognition of a mystery that transcends us and undergirds us, overshadows us and calls us to awe and to wonder. *The feeling that remains where the concept fails.*

In the pulpit ministry and in my preaching, I can bring you only to a certain threshold and then it has been our gift over all these many years to have another God-intoxicated, passionate minister who has been able to lift us and to elevate us into the very presence of the Holy. Not to downgrade in any regard that intellectual quest, only to recognize its limits and to recognize, as well, that it is in the community of worship that the concept fails and the feeling comes to us in that numinous awareness of the otherness of God. The mystery of God manifest in the face of Jesus, present to us and within us in the breathing, the wind, the spirit of God - it is that tapestry of articulation woven into the fabric of aesthetic appreciation, artistic expression that has brought us, week after week, into the experience of the Holy so that, leaving, the concept fades, but the feeling remains and we know we have been in the presence of God, to do so in community, in community where we come together to be reminded of who we are.

Friday evening the choir and pastors gathered with the Bryson family for a toast and a roast, and the Parlour was beautiful and we had a wonderful evening and I was so deeply moved at the memories of all these many years, and I realized

again the gift it is to be part of community, to have those long, deep bonding relationships, to belong to a family, to a community that is bound together in those ultimate commitments that have been melded into one, in-depth experiences of exhilaration and ecstasy, the community where we celebrate life and we have done it again so recently with so many tears. Mother's Day, a grandmother, fighting cancer, seeing her granddaughters kneel here affirming their faith. Confirmation, young people kneeling here with pastors' and parents' hands upon them, launching them into their life journey. Baccalaureate with the graduates receiving a rose and knowing that they have here a place, a home, always, again being launched into the grand adventure of life. Moments to remember. Moments that move us deeply so that when the concept fails, the feeling remains.

You see, the concept is not unimportant, but it is so very limited. Someone gave me a statement the other day, "All of our religions are but the ossified remains of former prophetic and ecstatic visions." That is true, for our religions, in all of their structures and all of their systems, are but human constructions which are stammering attempts to give expression to that ultimate Mystery that will always defy the concept, but a Mystery present to us as we gather so that as we disperse, a feeling remains and we know we have been in the presence of God. So, we gather as a community to remember who we are and whose we are, to celebrate our common life together and to be challenged to go out into this world to humanize it in the name of the God whose mystery was revealed to us in the humanness of Jesus.

Ah, dear friends, we have been a gifted people, richly blessed, blessed in that the concept in all of its limitedness has been lifted beyond the intellectual appropriation to the existential experience, and there has been no one so responsible for that as my partner and my dear friend, your Director of Music and Fine Arts, John Gregory Bryson. To him, thank you. And to God be the glory.