

The Spirit Beyond All Human Religion

Text: John 4:21-24; Acts 10:34-35

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

“The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem....The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and Truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and Truth.” John 4:21-24

“...I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.” Acts 10:34-35

We have traversed the Christian year once again. We have gone through the cycle. Last Sunday was Pentecost, and the Sunday after Pentecost in the calendar of the Church is Trinity Sunday, a time when we focus on the God for whom our hearts long. The one true and eternal God, creator of all, whose heart we have seen in the face of Jesus, and whose presence is with us in the Spirit. As we celebrate Trinity Sunday this year, let me suggest that it is time for us to begin to think about that Trinitarian formulation in terms of our present world, the state of that world, and the relationship of the religions in the world.

The trinity was the formulation in the third and fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian Church, trying to make some sense out of the experience - the experience of the one true God who obviously was there revealed in Jesus and was present in a powerful way in Spirit, the Spirit that Jesus promised would be given to empower them and to send them out into the world, telling the good news that he had brought, the good news of God. The God who was near. The God who was gracious. The God who was inclusive of all, and who could be trusted. The God of all grace and mercy. The formulation of the doctrine of the trinity in subsequent centuries was an attempt to make some sense of that.

Last week I suggested that maybe the whole development of the Christian Church was an unfortunate mistake, that maybe it was contrary even to the intention of Jesus himself. The formulation of the Christian Church that set up a competing religious institution over against Judaism – Jesus, I think, had no intention of

that. There is nothing in his ministry that would seem to indicate that what he was about was the founding of another religious institution. What he was about was mediating the presence of the only God, the one true God, the creator of the heavens and the earth, and promising that God was ready now to move broadly across the face of the earth in a spiritual presence and power. That's the promise of Pentecost. Jesus was pushing out the walls. He was removing the barriers. They killed him for that.

There's something about us. We want to have the last word. We want to have the only truth, all of the truth, and nothing but the truth. We get an idea; then we build an institution; then we set it up as an idol and we worship it. We claim that somehow or other this is the truth, and it becomes a truth that divides. What Jesus was trying to say, I think, was that there is only one God who is the God of all humankind, a God who would gather all humankind into one world community. Now we are at the point, Jesus was saying, where that Spirit of God will move us out into the world. "Go tell the whole world. Start in Jerusalem. Go to Judea and to Samaria, and the ends of the earth and tell them about the God of grace whose presence I have mediated." It didn't take very long, however, and that Christian movement, and the power of the Holy Spirit began to be constituted into a competing religious institution. Now down through the centuries we've had Judaism and Christianity claiming to serve and worship the same God, and yet claiming to be the way of truth to that God over against the other.

On this Trinity Sunday, 1993, let me suggest a modest proposal. That is that Christ Community become a catalyst for the undoing of the absoluteness of the Christian Church, advocating the undoing of the absoluteness of all of the competing religions, taking down the wall, breaking down the barriers in order that we might realize the intention of Jesus and the promise of Pentecost, that the Spirit of God would be poured out on all flesh. It seems to me that this is what Jesus was about.

The reason I am concerned about it more and more, is because religion is such a potent, powerful force. It is the most powerful force in the world. The force of religion in our world in the various divided camps has placed our world in peril. It is time for us to stand up and confess that we have absolutized our own partial vision over against other partial visions, and thus denied the very thing for which Jesus lived, and for which he died, which was for us to see the universal calling of all the children of God into that one world community.

Hans Küng, the Catholic theologian, has said that without peace among the religions there will be no peace in the world. He's right! And then he goes on to say that without peace among the churches there will be no peace among the religions. So there's a sense in which talking about a dialogue among the religions is already a step removed from where we are. But over twenty years ago, right about this time of year, this congregation changed its name from The First

Reformed Church of Spring Lake to Christ Community Church. That was done intentionally in order to create a new image, in order to establish the fact that here we would have an ecumenical community that reflected the whole spectrum of the body of Christ. Here we would honor all of the faith traditions. Here we would blend the traditions into a new mix and a new mold that would be reflective of the breadth of the Christian church. And it has happened. You are a broad spectrum of Christian traditions in your various backgrounds. If this community were a dog it might be considered a healthy mongrel. Nothing pure about this place. It is all mixed up and that's healthy.

But it's not enough! We have got to take the next step. Somebody has to stand up and say,

“For God's sake, for peace in the world the respective human religions are human constructions that need to be transcended in order to realize the Spirit of Pentecost, because the Spirit of God is beyond any of the particular concretizations of the respective human religions.”

It seems to me that this is what Jesus was about. But too soon after the day of Pentecost, as the Christian movement began to sweep across the face of the earth, things went awry. A Christian Church was born. I am not saying that we have to undo two thousand years of history. Nor am I so naive as to believe that the Spirit of God does not work through all of the stuff of history, even through our blindness and our obstinacy; even through our absolutizing of our partial views, the Spirit of God works. Paradoxically, the God of Israel was brought to the nations by the God of the Christian Church. But I *am* suggesting to you today that the respective absolutizing of human religious institutions *must* come to an end. It is time for someone to speak for God and for the Spirit of God, and for the promise of Pentecost, bringing all of those who would serve and worship and adore and hunger after the one true God into one community of faith no matter how many faces it might have.

It seems to me that the Trinitarian formulations of the Church, which came four hundred, five hundred years after Jesus in their final form, are a block to the dialogue among the religions. It is very interesting that in the year 312 A.D. the Emperor Constantine, the Roman emperor, established the Christian Church. What a tremendous victory that was. What a triumph. From a ragtag bunch of nondescript people with a vision and a passion, a persecuted people, in less than 312 years, the Christian Church becomes the established religion of the empire. Is it a coincidence that the same emperor called a church council nine years later, the Council of Nicea in 321 A.D., the council that formulated the exalted Christology of our creeds and our liturgies, our prayers and our hymns? On page 12 of your hymn book there is the Nicene Creed.

The exalted Christology that exalted the conception of Jesus, which is stated there in Greek philosophical concepts, is a far cry from the Gospels. “God of God, Light of Lights. Begotten and not made . . . before all worlds.” And the formulation that

came out of that? The Trinitarian God. One God, but three in one, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, co-equal, co-eternal, blessed forever. A far cry from the Gospels. As a matter of fact, practically meaningless to us in our everyday experience. We don't talk that way. That conceptuality is something that we only brush against in church, in a traditional way, without it really penetrating to the depths of our being. The God for whom we long is a far cry from the formulations of Trinitarian Christian doctrine. The God we really long for is a God who embraces all . . . the God heralded by Jesus.

Take the story of Jesus in which Jesus has a very engaging conversation with a woman at the well. And the very fact that Jesus was there, in Samaria, is a sign of what he would later call the disciples to do – to go to all nations. The Jews and the Samaritans had nothing to do with each other. They hated each other. Why, they hated each other almost as much as the Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Church. (Laughter) The closer you are, you see, the greater the rivalry. Jews and Samaritans were cousins, but they couldn't stand each other. Jesus goes through Samaria because he doesn't happen to think that the Samaritans are a godless, off scouring of the earth.

He talks to a woman. To a woman! Unbelievable! Incredible! No man, no decent man would do that. There he is engaging her in conversation. Then he gets personal and she wants to change the conversation, so she moves to theology. (You can talk a lot of theology without ever getting personal.) She said, "Ah, I see you are a prophet. Now tell me," (Mount Gerizim looming up before them) "We worship here." (A temple is there.) "You a Jew, you say we must worship in Jerusalem. Who is right?"

Jesus, this Jew from Jerusalem, says to this woman from Samaria, "I'll tell you what, the hour is coming and *now* is when neither here nor there, neither in the concretization of religious devotion as it came to expression in Samaria, nor the concretization of religious expression as it came to full flower in Jerusalem – neither here nor there, but in Spirit, God's Spirit, the Spirit of the one true God who was creator in Spirit and in Truth. For such God desires you to worship." *Those who will worship will worship in Spirit and in Truth.*

Jesus is breaking down barriers against Samaritans. Breaking down the barriers against women. Breaking down the division between Samaritan worship and Jerusalem worship. It seems to me he was trying to say that all of that particularization of religion that came through Israel in which God was involved, dealing with a few in order to reach the many, concentrating on Israel because he loved the world, all of that particularization now needs to be universalized. We have got to break out of Gerizim. We have got to break out of Jerusalem. And ultimately, of course, such talk resulted in his death.

So maybe what I would propose sounds radical, but there's nothing new in it. It is what God has had to do throughout history. Smash the idols. Break down the forms. Smash our structures. Loosen our heads. Open our hearts. Peter, who

always suffered from ‘foot in mouth disease,’ hardheaded Peter has a vision on a housetop about noon time and he sees this sheep coming down with a grand smorgasbord and he hears the voice, “Rise and eat.”

“Not so Lord. I’ve never touched most of that stuff. Pure kosher diet for me.”

Then there comes a voice from heaven, “Peter, don’t call common and unclean what I call clean and pure and right.” Then there was a knock on the door and someone from Cornelius’ house – Cornelius, the Roman officer, a god-eater, a non-Jew, a Gentile – stands there asking Peter to accompany him. Peter was compelled by the Spirit to go, but goes apologizing all the way for walking over the threshold of a Gentile’s house, which flew in the face of everything he had ever been taught.

Cornelius says, “I’ve had this vision, tell me about Jesus.”

Peter says, “Well, okay. I’ll tell you the story about Jesus.” And as he is telling the story about Jesus, low and behold the Spirit of God came down (Whoosh) and these people break out into ecstatic worship. The circumcised with Peter, that is the good Jewish people who accompanied Peter, were amazed, because it happened to these Gentiles like it happened to them on the day of Pentecost.

Peter says, “Oh my goodness, this thing is a lot bigger than I ever thought. Maybe God doesn’t show partiality. Who could withhold water for baptizing these who have received the Spirit just as we did?” This experience scrambled his whole theology, shot to pieces all of the religious prejudices and biases. Shot all of the things that he operated on as the basis of his life.

Tough stuff, the Spirit of God! *Dis-comforter*. “Nudging discomforter,” that will never allow us simply to sit in our comfortable ruts absolutizing our partial views, absolutizing our very human flawed institutions. When will someone stand to say, “Enough?” When will we hear Jesus saying, “Not through Judaism, not through Islam, not through Christianity, not through Catholicism, or Orthodoxy or Protestantism, but those who would worship God must worship in Spirit and in Truth. *The Spirit that transcends is the Spirit that is beyond all human religions.*”

There is a wonderful parable that was loved by Carl Jung, the psychiatrist. It went something like this: The water of life, wishing to making itself known on the face of the earth, bubbled up in an artesian well and flowed without effort or limit. People came to drink of the magic water and were nourished by it since it was so clean and pure and invigorating. But humankind was not content to leave things in this endemic state. Gradually they began to fence the well. Charge admission. Claim ownership of the property around it. Make elaborate laws about who could come to the well. Put locks on the gates. Soon the well was the property of the powerful and the elite.

The water was angry and offended. It stopped flowing and began to bubble up in another place. The people who owned the property around the first well were so engrossed in their power systems and ownership that they did not notice that the water had vanished. They continued selling the nonexistent water and the people noticed that the true power was gone, but some dissatisfied people searched with great courage and found the new artesian well. Soon that well was under the control of the property owners and the same fate overtook it. The spring took itself to yet another place. This has been going on since recorded history.

On Trinity Sunday 1993, let me suggest that, way back there a couple of thousand years ago, there was one who came as a finger, pointing to God, inviting people to see through him to the one true God. The people got obsessed with the one who was calling them to look beyond him.

I think I saw this reality happen last night! I was watching television. Did you ever see those wonderful ads where they have beautiful dogs, full-faced on the screen? Well, we have a dog. I don't mention her as much as I used to mention Midnight. Midnight was emotionally dysfunctional and gave me a lot of sermon material. (Laughter) Hersey is more normal. I saw this heavy-jowled, droopy-eared old basset hound come on the screen. I wanted Hersey to see that dog. So I said, "Hersey, look, look, look. Look!"

Dumb dog didn't look. (Laughter) He licked my finger. (Laughter) He missed the picture because he fastened on the pointer.

My point is this. I don't believe Jesus came to start a Christian church, a church established in the Roman Empire, so the empire could identify with this King of kings and Lord of lords and find its power and identification with this exalted one. Jesus came and said, "For God's sake. Not here. Not there, but in Spirit and Truth."

God is waiting for the religions to give up in order that God may bless the earth and bring Shalom. At least that's how it seems to me.

I told Nancy when I was leaving what I was going to preach this morning. She said, "Oh, no!" I said, "It's true!" She said, "It may be true, but you don't have to say it." (Laughter) But I just did.