

The Feeling which Remains When the Concept Fails

Pentecost Sunday

Isaiah 6: 1-8; Mark 1: 9-15

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Spring Lake Country Club
Spring Lake, Michigan
May 23, 2010

Prepared text of sermon

Another Pentecost – The Festival of the Holy Spirit – fifty days after Easter. And next Sunday – Trinity Sunday – the Lord’s Day which brings the annual church year to its culmination after completing the cycle once again of the story of Jesus from birth to death-resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost.

We are gathered on this Sunday not accidentally – I chose it in consultation with Mr. Bryson because this is Pentecost and next Sunday is the celebration of the Trinity. Consequently it allows us to mine the deep riches of the Christian tradition – its themes, liturgy and music. But even beyond the rich traditional sources for worship, is the focus of the theme itself – this evening Pentecost and Trinity.

The last time we gathered as a community of friends it was at Christmas. The time before that it was All Saint’s Day. You see the pattern. I confess I love to celebrate these Holy seasons; it gives me a reason to dig once more into the story, the story of Jesus, the church’s story and relive again the moments of rich celebration and the message and meaning of these markers, these high points of our shared faith tradition. This is the shared story that has formed and shaped us, inspired us and given us hope and courage, comfort and consolation.

I do love it. I love going back to the old story, the ancient celebrations, seeking to grasp the depths of truth that came to expression in the story and then reflect on how to bring to fresh expression from our historical moment what was seeking to come to expression in the ancient story and in the early Church Fathers.

In fact, I have had half a notion to propose we form a church and we call it *The Church of the Holy Seasons*. Wouldn’t that be wonderful? We could set up an annual calendar – Christmas, Ash Wednesday/Lent/Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost/Trinity. I think I could handle four or five sermons a year. As for Mr. Bryson, he is still engaged about fifty-three Lord’s Days a year, so it would be no problem for him.

The Church of the Holy Seasons – I like that! Not bothered by buildings or budgets or staff – well, just a few tired ministers and a few wonderful volunteers gathering a community of old friends with many rich memories and shared story who still find meaning, guidance, hope and joy in the Story of Jesus and challenge in the Way of Jesus.

The Church of the Holy Seasons with the service beginning at 6:00 and the bar opening at 7:00.

Well, I play with you a bit about the Church of the Holy Seasons, but as for the Holy Seasons, I am serious. I love them and am still moved as we celebrate them together. The Seasons, the High Holy Days, tell a story. The story is obviously told in the cosmic, historical thinking of an ancient age. The world, the cosmos, the evolutionary unfolding of being as we know it, even with its deep mysteries still hidden, was not at all in their knowledge or understanding, but that does not mean they did not wonder about and wrestle with ultimate questions of life. They were conscious, self conscious, conscious of the other. They experienced birth and death, nature in its beauty and terror. And as far back as we have knowledge, they were religious in the sense of coming to terms with the Mystery of Being, with the meaning of human existence.

Our own Christian tradition flows out of the Hebrew religious tradition and that tradition came to full expression in the Axial Age, the period usually dated from 800–200 before the Common Era. In China, India, the Middle East and Greece, without any interplay between them, there was an awakening of the human spirit and a new self-consciousness.

I don't mean to go into this in depth but only to say that there was a profound wrestling with the Mystery of Being, the meaning of life, and the cosmic reality. The great eighth-century prophets of Israel are part of this landscape and it is out of this historical nexus that our Christian story arose. This is a huge subject and I am not pursuing it any further except to say that our ancient story, which in many respects appears to be naïve, even child-like, was not that at all. With what knowledge was available to Isaiah and Jeremiah and the rest of the Hebrew prophets and temple priesthood, they probed the ultimate questions of the human situation and sought to find a meaning and pattern in history's unfolding, observing the temple rites, offerings and prayers.

It was out of the womb of Israel that Jesus was born in the time of the Roman imperial domination of Israel and Judah. And the life, ministry and crucifixion of Jesus occurred in an ancient time but a time in which history was recorded. And the early Jesus movement, sensing still the presence of the crucified Jesus, declared his resurrection and were convinced Jesus whom they understood to be the Messiah or Anointed One was pouring out his spirit – that was the Spirit of God – on them, empowering them to tell his story and invite the world to believe in him whom they believed to be one with God. And they believed as well that

they were living on the edge of history whose curtain would soon fall and time would be no more.

Of course, they were wrong on that. They had no clue about where they were on the calendar of history. But regardless of their ignorance of where they were in history's calendar as well as their ignorance of history's other great civilizations and, indeed, of the cosmic drama of 13 plus billion years of cosmic emergence, they were not ignorant of the existential reality of being human in the perilous historical journey.

I go into this because here we are celebrating Pentecost and looking ahead one week to Trinity Sunday. Were our ancient forbearers simply naïve, unknowing and not to be taken seriously? If so why celebrate the Holy Seasons that stem from their story?

The point I am trying to make as we celebrate the Festival of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity is that those ancient observances were a human response to deep religious experience – the experience of encounter with the Sacred Mystery of all being, or, in the shorthand of symbol, the experience of the Presence of God.

The theologian Paul Tillich understood religious observance as “ultimate concern” and the term God as a symbol for the Ultimate. Tillich's term was “The Ground of Being” which was an attempt to move that ultimate mystery from a, perhaps too familiar, personal category. Yet, if our being at its highest is the personal, it is unlikely that some aspect of the personal will be denied to the sacred mystery. Whatever!

I stammer and stumble because I am trying to bring to expression an inexpressible reality. The most orthodox of Christian theology spoke of God's incomprehensibility. Yet it has been a universal experience of humanity that God's presence is known – in silence, vision or voice and responded to in the rich diversity of patterns of religious observances. And one such pattern of response has been the celebrating of the story of Jesus in the respective festivals of the Christian Year.

My title for this meditation is perhaps a bit mysterious but that is only to be expected for a discussion of the experience of God, of the Sacred Mystery of all Being – “the feeling which remains where the concept fails.” This statement is a quote from a classic theological text, *The Idea of the Holy*, authored by Rudolf Otto described in the *New World Encyclopedia* as follows:

Rudolf Otto (September 25, 1869 – March 5, 1937) was an eminent theologian and religious scholar in the German Protestant tradition. He is particularly remarkable for his contribution to the phenomenology of religious consciousness and his work in the fields of comparative religion and the history of religion. Based on his research and observation, Otto

developed the notion of the “numinous” to express the reality of the sacred as the defining element of religious experience. Otto thus stressed the unique and essentially non-rational nature of religious reality, one that he saw as irreducible to other elements. This stood in stark contrast to the commonly accepted view of his time that the real essence of religion lies in universal ethical teachings that can be rationally justified.

In the late 18th, early 19th century when the Protestant Christian theological endeavor was trying to come to terms with the Enlightenment that sought to reduce Christian faith to rational explanation and ethical teaching, Otto raised a forceful “No!”, claiming religious experience is a human experience that cannot be reduced to reason or ethics; rather, it is its own reality, a category of human experience beyond rational categories. In the forward by Otto to the first English edition (1923) Otto wrote:

This book, recognizing the profound import of the non-rational for metaphysics, makes a serious attempt to analyze all the more exactly the feeling which remains where the concept fails and to introduce a terminology which is not any the more loose or indeterminate for having necessarily to make use of symbols.

Otto registered a strong statement for the reality of religious experience – the experience of the “wholly other,” a designation for God which Karl Barth later picked up and popularized. The German title, *Das Heilige*, would be translated “the Sacred” or “the Holy”. The sub-title was “On the irrational element in the idea of the Divine and its relationship to the rational element.” Thus Otto in rigorous scholarly fashion was intent on taking into account both the rational and the irrational elements in the encounter with the Sacred Mystery – or, better, the rational and the trans-rational. It was his insistence on the trans or supra rational that set him apart from the climate of opinion of his times. Making a strong protest against the then current “domestication” of religious experience, his work made a strong impression and has had a renewal of interest from 1990 to the present, even though, as might be expected, he was criticized by conservatives because his insight called in question the exclusive claim of Christian theology, recognizing as he did, the common nature of religious experience in whatever tradition. He was criticized also by those who saw religion as simply ethics with a touch of passion. In spite of criticism from right and left, his work remains a significant marker for the reality of the religious phenomenon as a non-reducible, original category in its own right and, obviously, his work is a key element in the movement toward inter-religious dialogue and the study of comparative religions and the history of religion.

The feeling which remains when the concept fails – I suspect that statement fascinates me because maybe it defines me – literally from youth trying to understand rationally what I have experienced beyond reason – the feeling that

cannot be denied even when I cannot explain it in terms of the concepts of rational discourse.

The band of Jesus' followers no doubt stayed together, no doubt bewildered, no doubt wondering what was next, no doubt sharing their loss, their grief and yet their sense that somehow, somehow He was with them still. "He lives," they exclaimed. They went back to their Scriptures, they tried to make sense of their experience. And then it was the Jewish Festival of Shavuot, the commemoration of the giving of the Ten Commandments fifty days after the Exodus. Jews came from throughout the empire to celebrate the Festival in Jerusalem and it happened – an overwhelming sense of the Presence of the Spirit of Jesus who was understood to be the Messiah, the word for anointed in Hebrew – the Spirit of Jesus which was the Spirit of God. It was an experience of the presence of God and they knew the ecstasy of being lost in wonder, love and praise.

We have the event recorded in Acts 2. The story as related there must have an historical core whatever the actual event entailed. I am not really concerned with precisely what happened except to say as the Jewish Jesus Movement moved out and eventually became a Jewish/Gentile Jesus movement, indeed, the Christian Church, this event was looked back to as the birth of the Christian movement.

That there should be an encounter with God was not novel. I read from Isaiah 6, the familiar record of Isaiah's vision of God in the temple in the eighth century B.C.E. wherein he heard his call and responded, "Here am I, send me."

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord
sitting on a throne, high and lofty...
and the angelic hosts called
Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts;
The whole earth is full of His glory.

Isaiah writes of his horror before the awesome one, only to be touched, cleansed and assured by the angel ministering at the altar.

What do you make of that?

I also read from Mark's Gospel. Before there was Pentecost or Easter or Good Friday, there was Jesus' ministry. For Isaiah it was a time of crisis – the king was dead. For Jesus it was the Roman Imperial domination. John the Baptist was leading a Jewish renewal movement. Jesus came by and was baptized by John and as he emerged from the waters

...he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven,
"You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased."

Mark then tells us that the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and then interestingly Mark tells us, after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying,

The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.

Then Mark tells us Jesus called his disciples and the preaching tour in Galilee ensued.

I don't think I ever juxtaposed the vision of Isaiah and the baptismal epiphany of Jesus before but it is interesting that both occurred at a time of political/social crisis. Both were grasped by a calling. Isaiah spoke of a people walking in darkness seeing a great light, a people to whom a child was born who would be among other designations the Prince of Peace. He spoke of the birth of a child who would be named Immanuel, a name signifying "God with us." And again he wrote of a shoot from the stump of Jesse upon whom the Spirit of the Lord would rest.

Don't hear me attempting as is common in classic orthodoxy to see Isaiah predicting the birth and ministry of Jesus. What I am really attempting to suggest is the reality of the encounter with God, the reality of spiritual experience wherein is sensed a calling to point to an alternative world – a world marked by justice, compassion and peace. This was Israel's vision at its finest as it came to expression through the prophetic word. And the same was true of the ministry of Jesus – a vision for which he was crucified by the established powers of Temple and Empire.

So here we are on Pentecost. We have a story, the story of Jesus who emerges from the story of Israel and, in the wake of his life, death and ongoing presence, there is an overpowering experience of Jesus' continuing presence and power calling those gathered followers to get on with the cause, to proclaim Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life.

And we are here this evening because they did! The Jesus Movement was born and 2000 years later the story has reached us – the story of the Way of Jesus, the way of love, the way of peace.

Next Sunday is Trinity Sunday. I'm sure you have been bored to death with sermons on the Triune God. I remember one I preached a few years ago – "One plus One plus One = One". Rather cute I thought.

Some of the finest minds the human family has produced have wrestled in deep philosophical endeavor to understand, define, describe the doctrine of the Trinity. Profound human thought has labored at the task. In a sermon from Riverside Church in New York City, the late great preacher, William Sloan Coffin,

referred to the primary author of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, Tertullian, and then wrote,

I mention Tertullian's debating because all doctrines really are born in debate. They are correctives, a way of saying "No, no, it's this way, not that!" "God in three persons" is a corrective to a monotheism too narrow to take in Christ, and a corrective to all forms of dualism that seek to divide the world between spirit and matter, or appearance and reality, or the forces of good versus the forces of evil. "Three in One" says "One God, one world."

The theological struggle to bring clarity to the nature of God has had its place and in no way do I denigrate the theological endeavor of the centuries of the Christian tradition. As I said above, that task has engaged the finest minds of the human family over the centuries. I do think however we can perhaps see the whole religious phenomenon, including the Christian faith, more simply from where we are in the unfolding human story.

All genuine religion is trinitarian. There is the mystery, the holy source, ground and goal of Being. There is the breakthrough of that Holy One, whether to Moses, Isaiah or Jesus, Buddha or Mohammed. And out of the respective encounters and callings there emerges a vision, a light, a teaching, a way. And the visionary responds to the encounter and call and gathers a community which adopts the vision and follows the way, creating rites and rituals, prayers, observances and sacraments, by which to keep the story alive and to be reminded of the way, and by means of which to teach the convert and the rising generation. The observances form the rhythm, the liturgy of life as it were, and shape the community, giving it form and identity.

That's why I, admittedly playfully, suggest we form the Church of the Holy Seasons. It is in the annual observance of the flashpoints of the Christian story that we remember the Story, that we are moved in our depths by that which has formed us, that we are touched anew with the Grace we first knew as we embraced the story and sensed we are embraced by the good and gracious God toward which it all points.

The Holy Trinity?

Simple: The Creative Mystery, our Source, Ground and Goal, has become human – has a face and breathes on us the breath/wind of life, so we know beyond knowing, for where the concept fails there is a feeling that remains and it is love and grace and peace.

The Church of the Holy Seasons – we need a name because Christ Community Church is a name no more. In an E-zine, Ian articulated very well why it was time

– I would say overtime – that the name be changed. The logic of names and the reason for the change are expressed very well. I agree totally.

Sometimes one understands oneself best by realizing what one is not. Ian and his leadership people have named themselves by that they are becoming and have become. Only one statement with which I disagree in Ian's piece – saying they had many names submitted that expressed the need to "move from a narrow Christian name to something more universal and inclusive."

I suggest Christ Community was not a "narrow Christian name;" quite the contrary, it defined our movement to becoming a truly ecumenical community. Furthermore we put into practice the insight of Rudolf Otto that there is a common element in all religious experience – the revealing of the hidden mystery that is God beyond all human conceptions. Interfaith experience was a marvelous dimension of our community life. What that did, however, was, in understanding the other, help us to understand ourselves at a deeper level. I would suggest we became more Christian, that is, more reflective of the Spirit of Jesus even as we affirmed the truth and beauty of other ways.

I bring this up because it is a teaching moment – maybe to create clarity as to why you are here and not there. One makes a choice to experience the Universal in the particular or to seek a Universal without particular definition.

It is possible our brothers and sisters will be proven right over time. Perhaps the particular traditions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and all other traditions will fade and die in their particularity. If so some new vision/way/tradition will rise and fulfill the hunger of the human heart for the experience of God.

To be honest, I'm not interested in that. I have no need or even curiosity about such a possible spiritual future. Bless those who do but as for me it is the Church of the Holy Seasons – it is the Holy Mystery that has a human face by whose grace the Spirit mantles my whole being. I would be so blessed if my children's children's children were marked with baptismal water in the sign of the cross. If our future generation were familiar with a table set with bread and wine, if they got goose bumps singing "Silent Night, Holy Night," "O, Sacred Head, Now Wounded;" if they thrilled to the first organ chords of "Christ, the Lord, is risen today" and stood with moistened eyes as the choir sang "The Hallelujah Chorus," if they sang "Spirit of the Living God, Fall afresh on me" and if they experienced moments so freighted with eternity that they could but sing

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty
Heaven and Earth are full of your glory!

Want to join me in the Church of the Holy Seasons?

Reference:

Rudolf Otto (1869-1937). *The Idea of the Holy*. First published in 1918; Second edition, Oxford University Press, 1958.