

The Root of Vision and Values to Die For
Memorial Day Weekend
Trinity Sunday

Scripture: Jeremiah 9:17-24; Acts 7:51-60; John 14:15-20

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
May 26, 2002

Transcription of the spoken sermon

On the calendar of the Church, this is Trinity Sunday, always the Sunday after Pentecost. After going through the cycle of the life of Christ and celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Church has paused to take in its image of God - God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.

On the calendar of the nation, this is Memorial Day, the day in which we remember those who have paid the supreme sacrifice in order to preserve the freedoms and the liberties that we enjoy as a people. On this Trinity Sunday, which is also Memorial Day weekend, I want to suggest to you that the liberty and the freedom and the blessings that have endured in us as a people are rooted in the Triune God, that the vision and the values that have flowered and blossomed into this marvelous civilizational opportunity that is ours is not an accident, but a consequence of the vision and values that are rooted in God. Not accidental. To try to combine these themes this morning, let me suggest that the Trinity has become simply a dogma for us. It is a code word; it is that which marks the Christian tradition, a doctrine, and is largely incomprehensible to the vast majority of Christian people, incomprehensible because it was forged in language and philosophical conceptuality that we no longer share. It is no longer meaningful to us, and so, what we do is repeat the formula and, as I said, it has become a code word. It is a symbol for the God that Christians imagine. But it is hardly understood in the terms in which it was originally forged. And yet, the forging of it was very important because, through that very dogmatic structure down through the centuries, we have preserved that initial vision, that vision of God, the God revealed in Jesus and experienced in the ongoing presence of the Spirit.

As a matter of fact, all religious experience is Trinitarian in form, for we cannot understand God or comprehend God. God is a Mystery, but that Mystery takes on a face. It takes on a form or a shape now and then, here and there, a shape, a face. Moses, perhaps, killing an Egyptian, seeing the abuse of his own people, fleeing into the wilderness, struggling, wrestling with the nature of the human condition,

confronting a bush that burns and is not consumed, hears the voice of God and goes to lead the people of Israel out of bondage and into freedom. Moses becomes a founding figure, and the Exodus becomes a founding story, and a people, a community is shaped and a tradition is formed. And out of that tradition comes the Jew, Jesus, whom, encountered, caused those who knew him to say, "My God, this is indeed the embodiment of God. This is the face of God. In this one's face we see the heart of God." He was crucified, but they said, "You know, he lives. He is with us still - in the Spirit."

And so, John, writing his Gospel some six decades after the event itself, trying to give expression to it, stammers and stutters when he says, "I am in the Father and the Father in me, and you in me and I in you..." This kind of religious gobbledygook - what does it mean, after all? Can you make any sense of it? Hardly, I think. Yet, one certainly gets the feel for what John was trying to say. He has Jesus speaking about the Father and he says, "I'll talk to the Father and have him send you another advocate, a helper, the Spirit of truth that will be with you." And then two lines later, he says, "I am coming to you. I won't leave you orphan, I am coming to you." Well, is the Spirit coming or is Jesus coming? I suppose that is what was being pointed at.

The reality behind it was an ongoing experience of the presence of the Mystery that had taken concrete shape - whether in Israel as Torah or in the Christian movement as the continuing presence of the Risen Lord -

rooted in Israel,

finding embodiment in Jesus,

articulated in the Trinitarian dogma.

All religious experience is that way - there is a Mystery, there is a concretion, and there is a personal experience, or presence. Stephen, having encountered Jesus, seeing God in Jesus, giving witness to his faith, enraging those who were listening, is set upon, and he has a vision to which he gives witness. The heavens open, the throne of God, the brightness, the glory, and Jesus ... Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, dying in the manner of Jesus with forgiveness on his lips.

All religious experience is Trinitarian in form - a Mystery finds concretion and continues to be experienced as a personal spiritual reality, and, as a matter of fact, the history doesn't matter much once you "get it."

I laughed a year or so ago when I heard on the radio about a Jewish rabbi in California who suggested to the Jewish community that there wasn't a shred of historical evidence for the Exodus. Well, they got as angry with him as some people have gotten with me. Misery likes company. I enjoyed that. But, as a matter of fact, what difference does it make if the values of human freedom and dignity that came to expression in the Exodus, if the understanding of God as the

God who grounds human dignity and freedom, if that is grasped, if that is understood? It doesn't really matter if there was a Red Sea or not, or if the Sea of Reeds parted or not. And if what came to expression in Jesus, if what was embodied in Jesus is once grasped and one is grasped by it, then, if you're interested and curious you can ask about the historical Jesus, but as the philosopher Santayana said, when we have to do with poets and saints and heroes, that which comes to expression in them is a grace and a beauty and a truth that flows through them. They are the *channels* of it, they are not the *source* of it. They are simply the channels of it. And that which comes to expression through them, the truth, the beauty, the grace, is the thing in itself, and the historical data becomes as insignificant as William Shakespeare to the marvel of the drama, the plays which he offered, for you don't experience "Romeo and Juliet" or "A Midsummer's Night's Dream" and wonder about ol' Will, for it is the truth, the aesthetic experience, it is that which moves us in the depths of which Shakespeare was but the channel, the container, as it were. So, on this Trinity Sunday, all religious experience is Trinitarian.

I performed a wedding for a Jewish young lady yesterday, and in a prior interview of the bridal couple, she asked, "Do we need references to the Trinity?" I said, "No, God's enough." "But," I said, "as a matter of fact, your religious experience is Trinitarian," and it took her aback a little bit. But I think I convinced her, because that is the nature of religious experience. It is Trinitarian, because the deep mystery of God, the ground, the source, the creative center of all that is – for, after all, we didn't create ourselves, this cosmic process, this amazing venture of which we are a part, whatever its source, whatever its ground, whatever the creative process, whatever the creative interaction that moves it on – that Ultimate Mystery we call God. That God takes on a shape or a form or a face and continues to be experienced as an immediate spiritual reality, and that is the truth of the Trinitarian nature of religious experience.

In Israel, it was all rooted for us, but it came to sharp focus in the face of Jesus, and continues to be experienced in the power of the Spirit. Thus, this Trinity Sunday we celebrate God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. That, for us, is a statement of our faith and I am suggesting that that is the root of our vision and our values. It is that which has shaped Western civilization. I think I can say that, without fear of contradiction, Western civilization is rooted in that kind of vision and those values that emanate from Hebrew prophets, from Jesus, from the articulation of the Nicene Creed, that creed that gives expression to the experience of Jesus who was the embodiment of the God of Israel.

Look where it has gotten us. On this Memorial Day weekend we celebrate Western civilization in all of the awesome wonder that it is, all of the blessings that we have received, those blessings of political democracy, human freedom, the rule of law, pluralism - all of the wonder and all of the blessing of being a part of this Western civilizational grouping in this United States of America, which has blossomed and flourished, this society that was founded at the time when

authoritarianisms of every sort were being thrown off. Although Western civilization is not synonymous with the separation of Church and State, that is the manifestation in this nation, and I would advocate that greatly, because any kind of religious authoritarian claim on a people, on a human spirit, tends to stunt and to stifle. But we have been free, free to dream, free to create, free to organize, to assemble, to worship. It is a magnificent vision, with marvelous values rooted in God, the God of Israel who took on human flesh in Jesus, who continues with us in the power and the presence of the Spirit.

We are at the peak of our power. We have power to act unilaterally in the world. We have power to impose our will and to have our way. We are the mightiest nation on earth at this time, unchallenged by that which would take second place, and we are afraid. We are afraid because we have been faced with the reality of the fact that might and power cannot secure us, that billions spent in military armaments, that borders guarded and walls raised high cannot make us safe. We have become as a civilizational grouping and as a nation challenged by Islamic civilization in a clash of civilizations, not simply Islam as a religion, but thinking now in terms of those great civilizational groupings, we have been challenged and we are challenged. We have found that there is no safety in our might and our power, in our position or our prestige.

Bernard Lewis, who teaches at Princeton and is purported to be the foremost authority on the Islamic culture, has written a book, *What Went Wrong?* It was published just months before 9/11. He does not blame the West or America for the situation of the Islamic civilizational grouping. He does not blame Israel. He gives a very careful, historically accurate analysis of the Islamic civilizational group at this time, and he concludes his study by saying, "If the peoples of the Middle East continue on their present path, the suicide bomber may become a metaphor for the whole region." This was written months before 9/11. "The suicide bomber may become a metaphor for the whole region." There will be no escape from a downward spiral of hate and spite, rage and self-pity, poverty and oppression culminating sooner or later in yet another alien domination. The suicide bomber, a metaphor for a whole civilization.

Here we are at the peak of our power, with all of our might, and we are afraid, because we have learned the limits of securing our self in such a situation.

Last week in our Perspectives discussion following the service, Tom Wright suggested that we are empire, and he said, "I hope that you will not have to learn the lesson that the British Empire learned after the 19th century's domination." Someone listening heard him say that we were evil empire. He did not say we were evil empire, he said simply we are empire. That really cannot be disputed. We are the dominant power in the world, and any power so dominate that it can impose its will and act unilaterally is empire. And an empire need not be evil. An empire need only to operate as an empire in order to create the kind of alienation

that we have in our world today. The only possibility of resistance to empire is that revolt from weakness of which the suicide bomber is a metaphor.

So, in this Memorial Day weekend, when our vision and our values rooted in the Triune God are under siege, how will we respond? It is a very complex situation, dear friends. You see, the vision and the values that we claim, that we hold, that have flowered so fruitfully in our midst are the vision and values that have emanated from below, from Israel. On the world scene, nothing. From Jesus, a Jew, crucified. We call ourselves in the West "Christian." That is our religious tradition. But, that which was embodied in humility, indeed, humiliation, poverty and alienation has flowered and blossomed until it is the professed creed of the mightiest nation on earth. It is one thing if you're wealthy. It is one thing if you are in poverty to suggest redistribution of wealth. It is one thing if you are small and without strength to suggest the sharing of power. It is one thing if you have no say to seek your place at the table and to claim that everyone should have a voice.

But, what do you do when you rule the world and claim to be shaped, indeed, to have been shaped by the vision and the values of the God reflected in the face of Jesus? It is a very, very complex situation that we face. For, those who are poor and alienated and destitute and hopeless are not intrinsically virtuous. And we are not villains. But we are altogether human and the issue involves politics and economics, but finally it is not a political matter nor an economic matter. It is a moral question. What do you do if you follow Jesus? If you value the kingdom of God, the realm where God rules, what do you do when you are top dog? Or, is it top gun? How do you act? How do you respond? How do you address the wounds and the bleeding and the bruisedness of the human family?

We can continue to be strong and mighty and as vigilant as possible, as long as possible. But empires rise and fall and the West will be no exception. Or, we might try some radical thing that has never been tried before - that is, from a position of strength with an authentic humility, asking what the moral solution to the ache of the world might be. And how we in our power, our might, our resource, might begin to make a difference that would drain off the hate and the resentment and begin to reconcile the alien nations, if indeed it might be possible to move toward human community.

It is one thing when Jeremiah, simply a preacher in the midst of little Judah, speaks as the mouthpiece of God saying, "Let not the powerful trust in their power, nor the wealthy in their riches, but let them delight in this - that they know me, the God of steadfast love who delights in justice and in righteousness."

It is one thing for Jeremiah in Judah. But, what if it were not some poor preacher, but some eminent figure who could capture the fascination of his people, this people, I believe, who are of good heart, far better than the system that they have put in place? What would it be if someone might rise to say, "It is time for us, from the peak of our power, to begin to take seriously the Triune God

revealed in Jesus, that ultimate Mystery?" Oh, we speak about God, I know. We know so much about God. We are so confident and so familiar about God. It doesn't matter if you call it God. What we are talking about is that which is Ultimate. What I am asking is that which goes against the grain. But it is the grain of the universe, by God.