

Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31
Romans 5: 1 - 5
John 16: 12 – 15
Trinity Sunday

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Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church
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“God is Stranger than We Think”

Gaul was divided into three parts. There were three blind mice. Three people can keep a secret if two are dead. There were three men in a tub, fiddlers three, three little maids from school, and three bags full. There were three coins in the fountain. There was Tinkers to Evers to Chance. There was Huey, Dewey, and Louie. There was the Three Faces of Eve and, of course, Neapolitan ice cream. Three is a power number, a mystical number, a sacred number. As Christians, we claim to be mono-theists who believe in a Triune God. Today is the Sunday of the Trinity. Today is when smart rectors loan the pulpit to someone else. I have claimed before that if Christianity was only the invention of clever people, no one would have proposed a Trinitarian theology. Only God almighty would have the energy and patience to try to get humans to understand Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as One God.

And yet the concept of the Trinity, hard as it might be to explain, is essential to understanding the Christian view of God. First, this Trinity is not an angry God that we must appease through sacrifices to keep said God from destroying us. For much of human life, appeasing angry and punitive gods was par for the course. There have been times in Christianity where the punitive side of our understanding of God was emphasized. But the presence of God the Son, having taken human form and lived and died as one of us should be an eternal reminder that God is love and desires for all of us to be in harmony with God. Second, we understand that God is not merely the unmoved prime mover – the one who set the universe in motion but now does not get involved with our puny lives. This, too, was once a view of God, favored by Enlightenment scholars who looked at the universe and saw a celestial clock-work, wound up and set in motion millennia ago and running its own course without God’s involvement or apparent interest. Woody Allen was wrong. God does want to get involved with us but only if we invite God into our lives. God will never force God’s self upon us for that would alter God’s plan for all creation by ending our free will. Third, and you must have known I would make three points this morning, God is always more than we can grasp and understand. At the core of God’s presence is mystery – a mystery that is beyond full human comprehension but a mystery that is open and present to any who pay attention. God is stranger than we think.

It is instructive that all three great mono-theistic religions have traditions of mysticism and all three great mono-theistic religions have been made uncomfortable by those mystical traditions. For Jews, it is the Kabbalah and the many writings of Jewish mystics. For Islam, it is the Sufi’s and the writings of Rumi and the dances of the whirling dervishes. For Christianity, it is the work of ecstasies like John of the Cross, Meister Eckhardt, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, and many others. These traditions have been openly suppressed at times and almost always are treated with more than slight embarrassment by the establishment types who run world-wide religions. The mystics are like the slightly crazy aunt in the attic who is beloved but often hidden away from the world because she cannot be trusted to be polite and well-mannered.

I believe that Jesus is talking about the mystical elements of his Way when he says to the disciples, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” I think Jesus knew that the poor disciples were at their cognitive limits by the end of his ministry and that leading them into mystical appreciations and peak experiences of God’s grace and mercy might pop a vein in their heads. But Jesus also knew that we need the mystics among us to keep us connected to the mystagogy of God – that profound awareness that God and God’s universe is more amazing, more engaging, and more wonderful than we can know or even imagine. The mystics, for all their maddening obtuseness, provide all of us with a glimpse of the wonders that await us in the next world. It is the Trinity, in all its complexity and vagueness that reminds us that God is God and we are not.

I am not a great fan of mystics – mostly I don’t really connect with them. I think mostly my head gets in the way of my heart. But I dearly love that we have mystics in our tradition and in our world today. I think of them as the people hanging out over the edge of cosmic abyss, practically dangling over the edge of reality and sanity, and laughing and shouting about the astonishing wonders of God’s totally amazing, complicated, chaotic, and wonderful universe. They report back to the more cautious of us that out there the whole universe is wonderful and exciting and thrilling and appealing and amazing and is just plain there to keep us all goggle-eyed at God’s love and creativity. We find them in the people who have outrageous creativity; we find them in the people who dream amazing impossible dreams; we find them in the people who weave words and images and sounds and musical notes into moving statements of what is not yet but could be. We find them in our annoying prophets – the people who really describe what the emperors of the world are actually wearing. We find them in the marginal, edgy, people who fascinate us as they un-nerve us. We find them in all those who take us past our limits, take us beyond the known and the comfortable, and take us to heights and depths rare and exotic to us.

The thing with the mystics is to let go – let go and let God. When we try desperately to control everything in our world, we make ourselves crazy and we set ourselves up for failure. When we acknowledge our limits and accept God’s no-limits, then we come closer to the mystics. When we stop analyzing, calculating, planning, managing, predicting, shaping, promoting, and stop trying to be God, we can come much closer to God. It’s when we just open our eyes and our ears and all our senses and say “Wow, that’s beyond belief,” that’s when we know God in more of God’s Trinitarian wonder and glory.

Now, for some of us that sort of response is too dangerous – we don’t like hanging over the edge, we color always inside the lines, and we don’t like the window seat. We like to be in control. We hate surprise parties. We want always to control the TV clicker of our lives. But the enduring message of the Way of Jesus, the story of Pentecost with all its chaos and hub-bub, the wonderful and sacred mystery that is the church, and the fundamental mystery of life itself tells us over and over again that the future lies in the churning maelstrom of life. To live is to exist in some degree of confusion and chaos. But that brings life and joy and love and passion and meaning.

That is the deep lesson of the Trinity – God is more than we can ever know and that “more-ness” is in itself a primary symbol of God’s enduring love for all creation. The world is stranger than we think because God is stranger than we think. But God is always more and so are we. God is always growing and changing God’s creation and so are we. God is always in relationship and community and so are we. God is always loving and so can we. This is God’s true declaration:

“I am me and you are you but we are we and that makes three.” Amen.