

Speaking of God

sermon digest

Trinity Sunday, May 18, 2008

Isaiah 6:1-8

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Some years ago a young woman employed in Baptist women's ministries spoke tongue-in-cheek about scripture verses she and her single friends found appropriate to their situation. Jesus' invitation to discipleship was particularly appealing, she observed: "If any man will come after me, let him." However, on occasion and particularly with respect to prospects she and her friends considered less than desirable, Paul's blunt word to the Romans with a repositioned comma fit perfectly: "I would not have you, ignorant brethren."

Today's observance of Trinity Sunday is an appropriate occasion for Paul's words—comma returned to its intended position. Trinity Sunday is a festival of celebration, focused not so much on crossing our *t*'s and dotting our *i*'s in keeping with strict orthodoxy, as it is concerned to plumb the depths of our understanding. It is about revisiting our concepts and language about God and turning ourselves with a diligence to think and speak and act with the attentiveness and care the very center of our faith deserves.

To be honest, it may be an uphill climb, for probably no aspect of the Christian faith has been more at issue in the last half century than the church's teachings about the Trinity. On the one hand, the emergence of feminism and the rising desire within the church to speak more fully, more faithfully, more inclusively about God has challenged the male predominance in a Trinity traditionally represented as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On the other hand, growing familiarity with and appreciation for the diversity of religious faiths that dot our cultural landscape make us sensitive to the extent to which Christian teachings about the Trinity seem to erect a wall against deepening dialogue and relationship, particularly with those who happen to be Jewish or Muslim. And finally, we have to admit the truth that, if we are honest, the Trinity causes us just a little, if not a lot, of embarrassment. The seeming contortions we have to go through to make sense of the idea of Three in One and One in Three makes us want to soft pedal the whole idea if not actually send it back to the musty past from which it came. Given all of these issues, we're prone to adopt the coping method we learned so well in middle school and paper over those aspects of who we are that are different and put them aside as unimportant.

Is there another way? What can we mine from the teaching of the Trinity that makes us more faithful than obnoxious? More sensitive and appreciative than merely doctrinaire. More prepared to accommodate and celebrate diversity than reject it?

The Trinity speaks of the history of God. Fifteen years ago, Karen Armstrong captured the imagination of millions in the release of her book *The History of God*. Her topic, of course, was not the story of God within God's self, the story of God in remote, splendid isolation, but the story of God as God has been experienced in the 4000 year quest of Jews, Christians and Muslims. Similar to Armstrong's effort, the idea of the Trinity is, in a capsule, an attempt to incorporate that 4000 year experience in a single word. It reaches back to affirm the Holy One of Israel even as it celebrates our confession that God was in Christ. It is not an either/or, but a both/and. It is, in the words of William Willimon, "our earnest, though groping attempt, somehow to put into words what we have experienced of the overflowing love of God" through the ages["The Extravagance of Trinitarian Faith," Duke Chapel, May 30, 1999].

The author of Hebrews sought to put it into words nineteen hundred years ago: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son" [1:1]. A couple of hundred years later, Saint Augustine spoke of it in terms of the "plenitude" of God. This Creator God, who could have gifted us with an adequate, though uninteresting world, gifted us instead with a world of multitudinous variety. This God, who could have gifted us in creation and left us on our own, came to us instead through Israel's patriarchs, prophets and psalmists. God, who could have wound the world up once and left it running, has come to us again in Christ and comes to us and abides with us in the presence of God's Spirit. The Trinity is about God's history, but it is also about God's future. It is about a God creating, inspiring, challenging, calling and leading still.

When speaking of God, our language is always inadequate. Perhaps you remember the episode of *Leave It to Beaver* many, many moons ago when Wally, the older brother, was given the assignment of composing an essay describing his sentiments in response to a list of experiences or objects given him by his teacher. Wally's parents were horrified when they learned Wally's stock response to each of the items on the list: "When I see [or hear or feel] _____, words cannot express my emotions." At the insistence of his parents, Wally sat down and began the arduous task of putting his feelings into words.

In the words of Abraham Heschel, "The attempt to convey what we see and cannot say is the everlasting theme of mankind's unfinished symphony, a venture in which adequacy is never achieved [*Man Is Not Alone*, 4]. Only those, he suggests, "who live on borrowed words believe in their gift of expression."

We can, of course, settle for borrowed, second-hand religion. We can clamp our jaw and our minds and

spirits shut and merely echo the words that have been passed down to us. Or we can open ourselves to the mystery and find ourselves gripped in humankind's struggle through the ages to find words to give expression to our experience of God. In the final analysis, that is all we can do. We have no heavenly language to match the reality of the God of whom we speak. We can only speak in metaphors, realizing that we never really capture the full reality of who God is.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit gives expression to the broad expanse our history with God, but it does not finally capture that history, and it does not take away the mystery. Much of our frustration with the Trinity comes from our substitution of the word *person* for the word *persona* used when the Trinity was given its first full expression at the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E. *Persona*, a word used in Greek dramas to speak of the various masks one actor used in a play to depict different emotions or different roles, speaks, not of three different persons, but of the different faces we have experienced of God. We can liken that experience to the different relationships we have with one another. One person may be a daughter, a wife, a mother, a grandmother, a friend, a lawyer, a church leader and a community volunteer—many different expressions of one person.

Father, Son and Spirit symbolize the ways we have experienced God in history, but they do not exhaust all we know of God. Hebrew scriptures, for example, are full of not just masculine, but feminine metaphors for God. God is depicted as a mother giving comfort and quieting the child at her breast. God's womb carried and gave birth to the people of Israel, and God is pictured throughout the Psalms and in Deuteronomy and Isaiah as a mother bird sheltering her young and protecting them. The parables of Jesus represent God in a housewife looking for a lost coin and at a number of points in the image of a man acting in ways that were stereotypically feminine or at least remarkably distinct from the traditional male role. *Ruach*, the Hebrew word for Spirit is feminine; *pneuma*, the Greek word, is neuter.

Added together, we have at least 200 metaphors taken from the Bible and Christian history to speak of God. Some are masculine; some are feminine; some may represent either a man or a woman (Friend, Comforter, Guide); some are neither (Sun, Rock, Fire, Fortress, Ground of Meaning). And in our effort to be faithful to the immensity of the God we seek to name, we should use them all, while at the same time remaining open to new images yet unborn.

We speak because we cannot be silent. Isaiah 6, our scripture for the morning, is spoken of as the “call of Isaiah.” It is often placed alongside the calls of Moses, Gideon, Jeremiah and Ezekiel interpreted in light of its many points of similarity. Like them, it involves an encounter with God, a commissioning to speak or perform a task, a ritual act or sign of cleansing or preparation; and all but the calling of Ezekiel include protests and objections raised by the one being called and reassurances of God's empowering presence. Unlike an anointed king or the ordained priesthood, the prophet seldom had a bloodline or official designation entitling them to speak or act in God's name. God's call was the only credential they carried. Yet this experience of the living God, this encounter with the Holy One was all the only letter of recommendation they needed. No only were they entitled to speak, they were compelled to speak.

This makes us nervous, doesn't it? We are prone to think of the voices compelling the Son of Sam to commit murder, the Jim Joneses of this world who have twisted God's calling to their own paranoid ends and the arrogant, overbearing bigot who dismisses the faith of others as damned. We know well that all who speak in the name of God are not speaking for God. But what if we keep our wits about us? What if we acknowledge that there are certain signs that religion is becoming evil and we will seek help rather than following those signs? What if we in the tradition of Moses and Isaiah open our eyes to see God in the burning bush, in the quiet, awesome majesty of the sanctuary and in the wondrous splendor of all creation? What if we find ourselves moved by the God who was in Christ and who dwells among us in truth and in Spirit?

Knowing that we will not and we cannot give expression to the full mystery, knowing that we cannot say the last word because other words, other encounters, other images always lie before us—knowing all of this, encountered by the awesome holiness of God, we respond. Here am I. Send me.