

Scriptures
Romans 8:12-17
John 3:1-17

On the Right Path

The Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long recalled a story he read in a magazine article a few years back “a forest ranger in Wales described the most common question that visitors to his park ask the forest rangers. Many people, he said, come to the park to hike one of the beautiful trails that wander through the forest, trails designed to display the magnificent trees and plants, to let the hikers encounter the array of wildlife in the forest, and to take hikers on to hilltops for breathtaking views of the countryside. But the most frequent question that visitors ask the forest rangers is not "Where does this trail go?" or "How long does it take to hike it?" or "Do we need bug spray on the trail" but instead "Excuse me, can you tell me where the trail starts?"^[1] It makes sense. No matter how lovely or breathtaking a trail may be, if you don't know where the trail starts, you can't hike it.

I thought about that question as I wondered about what to say today, because today is Trinity Sunday, a day on the church's calendar when we lift up the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity and proclaim not only that God is one God, God alone...but also that God is in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Now, quite understandably, many people consider the idea of the Trinity to be rather abstract and remote, something that theologians and philosophers might worry about but that is of little concern to us regular folk in how we live our everyday lives. But that's not true. The doctrine of the Trinity is actually like a trail in a deep and mysterious forest called the life of God. If we will walk this trail called Trinity, we will see and experience amazing things; we will discover something of what God is truly like, in all of God's beauty and wildness and splendor.

What we see when we walk this trail in the forest called Trinity is that God is not like what many people think. Some people think of God as like a great big parent, a father or mother in the sky, or maybe a fearsome judge who stares down and makes us behave out of fear and guilt. Some other people think of God like a divine clockmaker who made the creation, wound it up, and lets it tick away on its own. Other people think of God as like some distant star, cold, unblinking, shining out there somewhere, but far away from us and our lives. But when we walk the trail called Trinity, we discover that God is not a fearsome judge or a clockmaker or a distant star, but God is rather a community of persons--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a living and dynamic communion of love and self-giving.”¹

¹ ¹ The Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long http://day1.org/3823-the_start_of_the_trail

And according to Paul we are a part of that dynamic relationship and communion. He said "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:15-17a)." According to Paul, we are not only God's children, but also heirs, and not just heirs, but co-heirs with Christ. Paul invites us instead to imagine a life of courage, the courage of those who have been adopted by God and invited into the full measure of God's blessings and riches. Jesus says much the same to Nicodemus, inviting him to image that we have the opportunity through our life in the Spirit to be born anew, born from above as God's children, those so precious God was willing to give his only Son as testament to how much God loves all of us.

"But we are getting ahead of ourselves here, because before we can walk this trail called Trinity into the life of God, we need, like the forest ranger says, to know where the trail starts. That by the way is what Nicodemus in our scripture passage today is asking. Nicodemus is a religious leader; but there is sometimes a difference, you know, between being religious, even being a religious leader, and actually knowing God. Nicodemus has a very public commitment to God on the outside; but he wants, as many of us do, something more, something deeper, a relationship with God on the inside. Nicodemus wants to walk the trail into the mysterious forest that is God. So Nicodemus comes to Jesus secretly, under the cover of darkness, to say, "You come from God. Everyone can see that. I want to know God, too; I want to really know God. I feel like I want God in my life. But how do I begin?" In other words, "Where does the trail start?" What Jesus told Nicodemus was shocking...shocking to Nicodemus and maybe shocking to us, too. Jesus said, "Nicodemus, you don't need God in your life.... You don't need God to come into your life. That's backwards. You need to come into in God's life. God doesn't come into your life. It works the other way. God offers us God's own life as a gift and beckons us to enter it. You need to be in the life of God. In fact, Nicodemus, you need to be born all over again, this time born into God's life."

"I don't know how to do that," said Nicodemus. "I don't know how to be born all over again into the life of God."

And Jesus said, "I know you don't know. Well, there is good news for you, Nicodemus. The life of God is not far away from you. The life of God has come near to you. Indeed, the life of God is sitting right next to you, speaking to you now." The love that binds together Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the passionate love that flows in the divine life, in the relationships of the Trinity, has spilled out into the world in Jesus. God so loved the world that God has given God's only Son...given a Son not to condemn the world but to save it...given a Son as a way into the fullness of the life of God.

In other words, Jesus Christ is where the trail starts, the trail that leads us into the joyful and loving life of God. This is why when people choose to follow Jesus and are baptized as new Christians, they are baptized not just in Jesus' name but in the name of the Trinity. To be baptized is not just a ceremony but a rebirth into a new way of life, into God's own life. To be a follower of Jesus is not just to ask "What would Jesus do?" but to be drawn into a communion with the fullness of God's life. Just as a new bride soon realizes that she has not just married a husband but married into his whole family, just so, to belong to Jesus is to belong to his whole family, to

be drawn through Jesus the Son into a deep and loving relationship with God the Father in the power of the Spirit.²

David Lose wrote “I don’t for a moment pretend to understand the Trinity...But I do know this: at the heart of our understanding of God as somehow three-in-one is the notion that you can’t fully or finally understand God without talking about relationship. That God is so full of love that there has to be some way of talking about that loved shared in and through profound relationships. Some say that’s why God created the cosmos and humanity in the first place, to have more people to love. But the Trinity goes even further, saying that from the very beginning of time the dynamic power of love that is at the heart of God’s identity and character can only be captured – and that dimly! – by thinking of the love that is shared... And so God’s essential and core being has always been a giving and receiving and sharing of love that finally spills out into the whole of the universe and invites all of us into it.”³

Because a baptism is about the love and welcome into the family of God. For me the act of baptism represents a symbol of God’s blessing being offered on the life of a child. I know in some churches they will only baptize if a person has completed classes or attends every week and although the whole purpose of baptism is to set a Childs life in the trajectory of faith be hope that families and children will come to church and faith - not so that we have more people in our nice comfy blue chairs but so that they know they are surrounded by God’s love, so that they become a part of a community of love and support and holy presence.

“The Reverend John Buchanan...retired after 48 years as a Presbyterian pastor; and in an article..., in which he was looking back over his half century of ministry, he remembered one Sunday service in which he was baptizing a two-year-old boy. After the child had been baptized with water, John Buchanan, following the directions of the Presbyterian prayer book, put his hand on the little boy's head and addressed him in Trinitarian language. He said, "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever."

Unexpectedly, the little boy looked up and responded, "Uh-oh."

Well, it was an amusing moment, and people in the congregation smiled, of course, but "it was [also] an appropriate response," wrote Buchanan, "... a stunning theological affirmation" from the mouth of this child.^[2] And indeed it was. That "uh-oh" was a recognition that everything had changed, that this boy would never be the same. He did not belong any more just to his biological family; he had now been born all over again, this time into God's Trinitarian family. Now he would be called to live out in the world the kind of love and self-giving that goes on among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He was being called in his baptism to live a different way in the world, God's way, a way that is sometimes met with rejection and scorn. No wonder he said, "Uh oh." Life would never be the same.

Every now and then we catch a glimpse, even in a world of pain and violence, of what being in this loving, self-giving, Trinitarian life of God is like....

² IBID

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/05/trinity-b-three-in-one-plus-one/>

To belong to God is to belong to the life of God, to the community of one God in three persons, and to be called to live our whole lives in the same manner that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to each other--playing tenderly, ...and playing with love. God loved the world so much that God gave his only Son, and this Son, Jesus Christ, opens his arms wide to welcome us into the very life of God. The trail into God's own life starts here."⁴

I heard the parable of the eagle who the eagle who was raised with chickens, for the first time this week. An eagle egg was placed in the chicken coop and hatched there and so stood in its barnyard scratching for corn and lived just as a chicken until he started to notice the glorious birds (eagles!) fly the skies. The parable ends in a few different ways. My favourite way to end the story is when another Eagle flies over to the coop and tells the Eagle acting like a chicken that indeed he is meant to soar. Most of the parable end with the eagle in the chicken coop I would rather have the story end with the eagle discovering who he truly was created to be and learning to soar high and powerfully through the sky. According to Paul, we're all eagles, and sometimes it takes an event like a baptism to remind us that we are all meant to soar, we were all created as co-heirs of the holy. Love and cherished beyond our comprehension.

May we live as if we know and believe.
Amen.

⁴ IBID