

Trinity Sunday B
John 3:1-17
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May 27, 2018

God's Transforming Love

Has anyone seen the continuing news coverage and interviews of our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry this week, since the Royal Wedding? If you haven't yet heard his sermon, you can find both the recording and the text online, and I'd highly recommend you listen. The world seems to have taken notice of his sermon of love and his challenge to imagine how Christ's love can change the world.

What a perfect lead in to today, Trinity Sunday. For love embodies the entire concept of the Trinity, our human-attempt to describe within the limits of language God's own self, a set of relationships, in which we, as God's people, have been "gracefully entangled" to quote a phrase from our former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. The Trinity reminds us of God's priority of relationships over individual existence, and God's loving invitation to us all.

It took the early church some 400 years to come to some kind of basic agreement on the Trinity. Scripture itself wasn't much of a direct help — you don't find that word *Trinity* in the Bible. Yet even without Trinity ever being specifically mentioned, the Scripture does consistently speak to God's work in the world, and it's in those stories that we find the raw materials, the essence of the Trinity.

Scripture tells us of God who creates all that exists in the cosmos, down to that smallest detail — including giving each one of us the gift of life. Scripture tells us that God redeems us all, walks with us, and bears our pain, even sacrificing God's own self on the cross. Scripture tells us that God knows us and calls each one of us by name, nudging us, inspiring us, and sending us out to spread God's love in the world.

These images, these stories of God's loving, constant, ever-present interaction with God's people led the early church to attempt to describe the indescribable, the mystery of God's own self, in terms that humankind could hold onto in meaningful ways. And over time, there was agreement to those classical words we've heard and repeated in our Creeds to describe our living and loving God: One God in three persons, God the loving Father/Mother, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

One triune God: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Our active God — God as a verb, God with a goal — and that goal is love. Early Greek theologians liked to talk about the Trinity as a kind of dance, a movement, of love — where there's an ability for each Person to always and eternally work in perfect tandem, never at odds with one other, ever aware of what the other two are doing. These three Persons of God working in perfect harmony to achieve God's goal of love, and this love explodes. A love so great that it overflowed to create all that is, simply so God could share that love: a transforming, life-changing, grace-filled love-invitation to all of God's creation that then inspires Creation itself to create new life and love, through relationship with God.

It's a heady concept, which may help explain why it took 400 years to put doctrine into words.

So how does the Trinity, our God of overflowing love touch our lives? Let's look at the story of Nicodemus from John's gospel, one person who was forever changed by God's love. We know he's a learned Pharisee, a pious leader of the Jewish people, a man of status, and part of the religious hierarchy. Yet Nicodemus has seen something in Jesus that moves him, pushing him to find out more about this strange rabbi and his teachings — even if it's dangerous to do so.

Nicodemus knows his curiosity is pushing him to question his foundations, the things he's always accepted and known. So Nicodemus is cautious, carefully covering his interest from prying eyes by seeking out Jesus in the darkness.

As a religious scholar, Nicodemus understands that what he's witnessed of Jesus' work in the world must come from God, so he asks Jesus, "How can this be?"

Jesus responds by speaking of God, the One who loves all God's creation, who has sent his son to rescue the world, showing us the way to new life through water and the Spirit. Jesus tells of the Son of Man who must be lifted up, so that all who believe in him may have eternal life.

Does Nicodemus understand? The text doesn't tell us, but I imagine he walks away in wonder, still trying to discern the meaning of Jesus' strange reply. We don't really know, for Nicodemus disappears from the story.

But God is working in Nicodemus and God's love transforms. For when Nicodemus returns in the 7th chapter of the Gospel of John, he's different. Here we find that the temple police have been sent to arrest Jesus, but come back empty-handed, saying that they were stunned by his words, having never heard anyone speak like Jesus. And Nicodemus speaks up, perhaps a bit half-heartedly, but his words are in defense of the lowly Galilean prophet who's causing so much trouble. This time Nicodemus isn't concealing his questions under the cover of darkness, but sharing his thoughts and ideas out loud and in the light, speaking among all the leadership of the ruling religious council. He's putting his own career on the line to share his views about Jesus.

And then, at the very end of John's gospel, Nicodemus appears once again, doing what no self-respecting, powerful, law-adhering Pharisaic leader would ever do: he's making himself ritually unclean at the holy time of the Jewish passover by helping Joseph of Arimathea with Jesus' burial. He's willing to touch a corpse, to care for the remains of a humiliated, abandoned, broken man, who was shamefully crucified. What's happened to Nicodemus?

He's changed. By the power of God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — Nicodemus is recreated into a new life, a new person, someone who sees more fully through eyes of compassionate caring, one that recognizes that sometimes we need to look beyond our human rules — rules created by the economic, political, and religious powers — and instead live more completely into God's goal of love, carrying that Divine light and love into the world. Nicodemus' life story shows us what can happen when we're willing to open ourselves to God's love in our lives.

This kind of spiritual re-birth is something that only God's love can accomplish, allowing us to begin to see the world in Jesus' upside-down terms — to recognize that the kingdom of God is where humility and kindness are far more important than pride and self-promotion, where we are called to strive for justice and peace in the world by hearing the voices of the meek and the lowly and the oppressed, responding with love and action.

It's not easy to live into the love of our Triune God, for God's love for us, that gift freely given, does call us to action. Our response to God's love requires more than thoughts and prayers, for treating one another with love, carrying Christ's light out into the world, showing our love of God by loving our neighbor as ourselves is active, for there is movement and action in love. God's love is a verb.

Are we willing, like Nicodemus, to open ourselves, as individuals and within community, to the life-altering transformative power of God's love?

Bishop Curry encouraged us last week to imagine what life could look like within our neighborhoods and communities, governments and nations, business and commerce, when love is the way. Imagine the new possibilities of addressing hunger and injustice, poverty and war, and finding room for all of God's children, when love is the way.

What are the possibilities if we too can turn away from divisiveness and fear and instead open ourselves to God's transforming love, reclaiming our Christian call to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves . . . a call that reminds us of God's longing for us to strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being?

It's hard work. It's uncomfortable and even painful to align ourselves with God's Word rather than the cries of the world. But although we live in the world, we are not part of the world. We are Christ's own. And following our Lord and Savior is a transformational journey, a journey to wholeness and new life, as God's love draws us into God's own self: recreating us, redeeming us, and sustaining us.

And what a joyous and magnificent journey awaits each one of us, as we open ourselves to the Divine, joining together with our Triune God, in God's own dance of love. Imagine the possibilities when we allow God's love to transform us, our communities, our nation, and the world. Amen.