

NHPC, Overland, MO—5/27/18

“Are We Stuck with Old Doctrines?”

TEXT: John 3: 1-17

Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost, a day of new beginnings and the birthday of the church. Today is Trinity Sunday, one of the low Sundays of the church year,

It is considered one of the most difficult Sundays to preach because it is the only Sunday of the church year dedicated to a theological doctrine. The temptation for preachers is to skip it, or drone on and on trying to explain the Trinity. It doesn't sound very interesting or inspiring, does it?

Furthermore, the *doctrine* of the Trinity is not in the Bible. Let me rephrase so that I am perfectly clear: The theological *doctrine* of the Trinity is not explained or described in the Bible.

However, the Trinity is based on Biblical ideas. A new commentary on the lectionary called *Feasting on the Word (WJK, Year B, vol. 3)* describes it this way: “Although there is no doctrine of the Trinity in the Bible (that is a later development), the reality of God, the Christ, and the Spirit permeates the New Testament.” (p. 209)

In other words, the reality of God described by the Trinity is found throughout the Bible, even if the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly defined and discussed in scriptures.

What is this reality of God described by the Trinity? Over many years the people of God have experienced God in three ways:

- God as the creator.
- God as Jesus Christ, the Savior.
- God as Holy Spirit, our guide and inspiration.

What does all this mean for us at New Horizons Presbyterian Church?

Before I delve into that question, let me say a few words about the history of the Trinity, as a doctrine.

It was first written down as an official doctrine of the Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. As Christianity moved in the Europe, it faced questions and concerns of a new culture. In response to questions raised by Greek philosophy, church scholars and bishops struggled to restate what Christians believed in new language.

The challenge was to remain faithful to the experience of God in previous generations, yet reformulate what the Church believed in new language for a different culture.

The result was the *Nicene Creed*, which was the first and most universal statement of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Over the many centuries since the Council of Nicodemus approved the *Nicene Creed* in 432, it has been accepted by most Christians all over the world as a faithful restatement of what we believe about

God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit as they were experienced in the Bible.

By the way, the more familiar *Apostles Creed* which we will recite today, was developed sometime later as a more concise and easier to understand version.

Still, there are many questions about the Trinity. What do we really believe about the Trinity? Is it necessary to confess the Trinity to be a Christian? What does the Trinity have to do with our lives right here and now?

A good friend of mine who is a Lutheran pastor (and best man at our wedding last summer) tells the story about a friend of his who is a Catholic priest.

One of his parishioners asked him, *"Father, do we believe in the Trinity?"* *"Believe in it?"* he said. *"We invented it."*

This story can give us valuable insight into the Trinity and life of the church right now.

Let's be honest: All theological doctrines, including the Trinity, are human inventions. Theological doctrines are not just invented out of thin air on a human whim. Rather, they are created by the Church to describe and explain human experiences of God.

The best doctrines are based on the experience of God as described in the Bible. They have stood the test of time and still remain vital and meaningful. For most Christians today, the Trinity is such doctrine.

The point of all this is to say that the church is constantly reinventing itself to be relevant in the place where it lives. This reinvention is grounded in our past traditions, especially the human experiences of God as recorded in the Bible.

The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that God was, is, and will be experienced as:

- the Creator,
- the Savior of the people, and
- our guide and protector.

Our challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is to stay true to this experience of God, and yet also keeping it fresh and new as we share it with our friends and neighbors.

My job as your interim pastor has been to guide you in recalling your experiences of God so that you can share them with others. When you do this, you will also revitalize your congregation and preparing it for the future

Nowadays, people are worried about the church's future. This is especially true in our smaller congregations like New Horizons that are without a pastor. What will be the future of this congregation? Can you attract a pastor to lead you? Will you be able to draw in new people to help your congregation grow?

The doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that Christians have always faced the challenge of sharing their experiences of God in new circumstances. This challenge is before you right now as you look to a new future.

How do you remain faithful to your past traditions, yet also share your own experiences of God in a vital and meaningful way with others?

This is not always an easy task.

We have many questions as we look to scripture and theological tradition for guidance. Our gospel lesson for today is the well-known story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the dark of night to ask questions.

This passage was selected as a Trinity Sunday text because it is one of few passages in the NT which talks about the relationship of God, the Son, and the Spirit. Nicodemus had many questions about these relationships.

What I think is intriguing about this text is that Nicodemus asks his questions in the dark of night, almost as if he is embarrassed to talk to Jesus. Let's not forget that he was a Pharisee; they were Jewish leaders *opposed* to Jesus. Yet, he was attracted to Jesus. He knew that Jesus was from God and would lead him to him to a new experience of God. Yet he was reluctant to come to Jesus, probably because of social status and religious politics.

What about us? Are we reluctant to share Jesus with others? We are here, I assume, because we have had our own experiences of God.

Are we willing to share that experience with others? Are we willing to nurture others so that they will experience Jesus

Christ? Or are we stuck in place, like Nicodemus, reluctant to come out of the shadows?

Let's become unstuck. How many people are wandering our streets knowing that there must be something important going on behind our closed doors? Maybe they are reluctant to come in ask questions. Maybe we are uncertain about the answers.

I am sure some of you watched the royal wedding a week ago and heard that amazing sermon by Bishop Curry of the Episcopal Church (USA). (I am planning to watch is soon on *You Tube*.)

A friend of mine, a retired Episcopal priest, told me on Monday that a colleague of his, from the pulpit last Sunday, ask if any was there because of Bishop Curry's sermon. Three young people in the back row sheepishly raised their hands.

They were young people eager to hear the good news of God's love, but they were reluctant to go through the church doors, until they heard an amazing sermon.

There are young people in our community eager to hear the good news, but they reluctant to come to church maybe we are reluctant to let them. If they show up anyway, we usually talk to them, but then what?

These are the questions that you will struggle with as you consider the future of your church. I have been here to help you, but don't forget that our most

important help comes from our biblical ancestors who experienced God as Creator, Savior, and Sustainer.

This God still comes into our lives, whether we like it or not. As Presbyterians, we are stuck with God who comes to us as Trinity. However, we can reinvent our old traditions to help us speak to the situation of today.

Often, we are reluctant to do this because we are stuck in our own ways. But the Trinity and other church doctrines can be restated for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The challenge of you to take up this task so that you reinvent your congregation. As you share God's love with others, reinvent yourselves. Become unstuck, remembering that God will always be with you as you move into the future.

Let us pray.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (II Corinthians 13: 13.)  
AMEN.