

May 27, 2018
Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 29
Romans 8:12-17
John 3:1-17

Nicodemus said to Jesus, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"¹

Nicodemus is on stage for the first of his three cameo appearances in John's Gospel. He has sneaked to Jesus under cover of night. He wants to know more, and Jesus obliges.

In the lectionary gymnastics that come with Year B, note that we have swung back to near the beginning of John's gospel. We actually heard the last part of this reading just a couple of months ago, on the Fourth Sunday in Lent. On that occasion, you heard me preach about salvation.

Today, we're going to talk about being born again. Yeah, scary. I don't think I've ever attempted that. The thought came from Monday night's Vestry meeting. Our monthly meetings usually begin with Bible study. For Bible study this past Monday, we used today's reading from John. I encouraged folks to try to let go of the need to "understand" the passage, and instead just imagine what it might be saying to them. As it played out, some of us admitted to having difficulty letting this passage speak for itself. That's because our heads contain repeating voices from other traditions that have a lot to say about being "born again." Those voices can be hard to overcome.

Let's begin by recognizing that, in the annual turning of the liturgical year, today is the last major benchmark before the long "green" season that extends through November. Today is Trinity Sunday.

Trinity Sunday is one of the church's seven major feast days, but you'd never know it. It lacks the cultural cachet of Christmas or Easter or even of All Saints. It lacks the liturgical creativity applied to Pentecost a Sunday earlier. For us, because of personnel changes and a poorly timed national holiday, this year it even lacks a choir. Maybe this paring down is our cue to be more pensive about the Trinity this year.

If you didn't get a chance to read the information on page 2 of this morning's bulletin, I want to point out the two paragraphs at the bottom. First, it has been long recognized that our language for God will always fall short. Second, because it will always fall short, we might as well explore expanding our language for God. If we do so, we might just realize a healing of harms caused by our historical linguistic parsimony.

If you're getting nervous, let me say this: the traditional Trinitarian language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will always be important. But they need not be the only offering at the table. That language may very well be divinely inspired; it most certainly is a product of its time and place.

I suspect that an important aspect of that context is the pre-scientific understanding of conception and childbirth. To use a garden metaphor, men were understood to provide the seeds and women the soil into which the seeds were planted. On Monday night, I got an image of myself from when I used to be a serious backyard gardener. I grew carrots; carrot seeds are about the smallest seeds you'll ever plant. You prepare the seedbed, dig a shallow trench, sprinkle in some fertilizer, carefully drop the seeds into the trench, cover them up, water the soil occasionally, and presto: you get a row of carrots.

Trinitarian language may reflect that understanding. The language of being born again in today's text may also reflect that understanding. If I imagine myself as a carrot, I can see myself as occasionally feeling dried out or undernourished. It would be a pretty great thing to be able to hop back in the garden for a spa day.

Even more, let's reconsider all this in light of current science. Of course now we know that women's bodies are not *just* the seedbed. For human reproduction, two contributions are required. One must be an ovum, and, at least for now, a woman has to provide it. Still, in the end, science falls short. We know what's necessary, *and* the result remains wildly and beautifully unpredictable.

There's one more thing I want to peek at in terms of traditional Trinitarian language. For this I'm going to offer the words of theologian Jay Emerson Johnson:

The modern Christian calendar confronts us every year with a Sunday devoted to an inscrutable doctrine one week after the exuberance of Pentecost, the gift of the flaming Spirit. This is always a challenge for parish pastors and preachers: Can I really say something that is "correct" yet still palatable? Spoiler alert: No, you can't.

The doctrine of God as Trinity carries profound consequences that really do bear on matters of life and death.

Why so deadly serious? Christian history presents a host of reasons, but I'm thinking today of contemporary Western society, especially in the United States, where virtually any genuine or effective notion of the "common good" has vanished from our public discourse. I consider this cultural climate a direct legacy of the severe individualism of the "European Enlightenment," which extolled the virtues of individual reason. Important, necessary, glorious things sprang from this, but so did many dolorous wounds. Among them: every man (and especially every woman and child) is on her own, resolutely autonomous and adrift on a sea of impossible choices and hideous dead-ends. And the implications of this in a society of misogynistic white supremacy are legion.

The ancient societies who crafted Trinitarian doctrine lived with a decidedly different view of what it means to be human. I don't mean to valorize their views (problems abound), but they did seek to make their understanding of God at least consonant with their understanding of human life, which is not a life of autonomous isolation but one that is entangled with countless other creatures utterly dependent on each other.

Right there the essence of God as Trinity appears—we do not worship an isolated entity, gloriously enthroned on a distant seat of self-sufficiency. Whatever "God" means, the word ought to inspire deep, essential, resilient sociality: communion.

Many other religious traditions harbor similar insights about the relational character of the Divine and I resist supposing Christians have any religious monopoly on this. And still, in contemporary American culture, where "Christianity" ostensibly holds sway, it's high time to retrieve and recover and reconstruct the profound insight underlying that ancient doctrine: "God" is love, from all eternity, and therefore social and communal; God is communion itself.²

In the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo described the Trinity as Lover, Beloved, and Love. That word, love, has been in the news a whole lot the last week or so. Who'd have guessed?

In Michael Curry and William Barber, we seem to have among us a couple of rock star Christians. It has been a long time since that has happened for Christians like us. It looks to me like many Christians in our nation looking for a reset. I know I am. I'm ready for a reset, and I'm ready to help others with their own. Maybe it's a matter of being born, of water and the Spirit, again, and again, and again. In that, let's take the Trinity seriously. All we need is some fertile ground, a little water, and a slight breeze.

Notes

¹ John 3:4, NRSV.

² Jay Emerson Johnson, from a blog post titled "The Laughable Holy Trinity," from his blog *Peculiar Faith: Renewing the Church, Changing the World*, May 22, 2018, available online at <https://peculiarfaith.com/2018/05/22/the-laughable-holy-trinity/> (accessed May 27, 2018).