

Sermon on Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
Trinity Sunday, May 22, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

The title for my sermon today is: *Questions about the Trinity that are on the Final Test but You Were Afraid to Ask*. That's a joke.

If you know a teacher or a student in elementary, middle school or high school these days in Minnesota, you know how much pressure there is for schools and students to do well on graduation standards testing. Schools that fail to measure up can be put on probation; principals and teachers can lose their jobs. So the tendency in recent years has been for teachers to “teach for the test” – instead of engaging children in the ways they learn best, like to learn how to read for the sake of the love of reading, to conceptualize numbers, to solve problems, or to understand and appreciate other cultures. “Teaching for the test” is making the *score* the thing, and making the *grade* - not understanding - the goal of education.

So there is a similar temptation in teaching the Christian faith - when we teach the “doctrines” of the Church, and by-pass the relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ. Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Trinity, which is a reason enough to celebrate – the concept of God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But could it be that teaching the doctrine of the Trinity is like “teaching for the test?” Does it limit us in our thinking about God – making God a “teaching” to be memorized or learned, rather than a relationship to be deepened? Does the doctrine squelch our imaginations when God invites us to see the Holy in all things created, in all life, in all mercy, compassion and grace, and in the life-giving power of the Spirit, or that the handiwork of God continues today even when we do not see it or imagine that God is there? But guess what? There is no Test!

What if....we see the lessons today in scripture...as an invitation to imagine and encounter God in ways that challenge us and go beyond our present thinking about God, or even what we think is possible, orthodox, or even (dare I say it?) – *Lutheran!* I am not encouraging *heresy* per se, but there is value in thinking outside the box, or outside the circle. For without what is often known as “heresy”, we would never have a creed – or three creeds – or any doctrines at all! There would be no box! Because challenges to what is accepted thinking, imagination or new thinking, have always forced the Church – individual Christians, pastors, scholars and bishops – to think carefully about what we can agree to and create statements of faith. Like summaries of faith – in a box!

But I am not going to preach today about any of those three ecumenical creeds – the Apostles, Nicene, Athanasian creeds – thank God you say! Or directly about the Trinity, even though it is Trinity Sunday. Taking the lessons today as a

starting point, I invite you to imagine God, and how God is present with you and with all of us in the world, not only in the past, but also today and in the future. I ask you to think about your own experiences in the past week, or recent days, when you may have encountered God, and how that looked, how it felt.

For example, last Sunday in our worship, we celebrated the confirmation of four of our young men, in the laying on of hands and with prayer. I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit as I laid my hands on their heads, and when their parents and godparents laid their hands on them as well. What did *you* feel?

Then, in the afternoon, six local church choirs gathered to listen to each other sing, and to hear testimony from Ujamaa Place men. I felt the spirit of God present in the singing and in the warm fellowship of people who are black and white. It was a different vision of what is possible through faith, instead of the chaos, division and violence at political rallies and in neighborhoods around police precinct headquarters. Last Sunday, we saw that which seems to some “unimaginable” – that we can “all get along” is indeed possible. In fact, for it to happen, all we have to do is imagine it, be open to it, and then...just do it! God will already be there with us, urging us on! But God is also there in the chaos!

Today our first lesson is from Proverbs 8, verse 1. *“Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?”* We recognize God’s presence in the wisdom of God that is passed on to us through God’s Word. Note that here wisdom’s pronoun is “her” – which challenges our thinking through the use of new pronouns for God. So is God – or the wisdom of God – male, or female? I don’t think it’s either/or, but here the pronoun is feminine. It’s fascinating as we read on, that “before the earth was created, I was there, beside God.” “She” (wisdom) was beside “him” (the Creator). Just like we read in the prologue to the gospel of John in the New Testament, when “in the beginning” the Word was with God (the Word being known to us as Jesus). This is an invitation to expand our thinking about gender – is it only about the grammar? – when we imagine God.

There is a story behind this. About 20 years ago, when I had first come to Redeemer, there was an “Imagining God” conference held at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. Our own Diane Jacobson was a presenter. She spoke about the Wisdom of God portrayed as “Sophia” in this Proverbs passage – what could that mean for us in the Church as we imagine God? (Sofia is the Greek word for “wisdom.”) It was an awakening of imagination for pastors and leaders of the Church who heard it. Now, word of this “got out” and rumors spread that Diane was pushing a goddess named Sophia. She received hate mail, and was called a radical feminist and a heretic by some. Now, we know Diane Jacobson. We know her faith, her faithful teaching of God and her love for God’s Word, her delight in reaching for new insights in the Bible. Diane is no heretic! But if it is heresy to provoke new ways to imagine God – even feminine imagery – to hear God’s Word

and experience the power of God's love in the world in new ways – then God, please make me a heretic for the gospel! A heretic with imagination!

So wisdom was present in the chaos of creation. To make this imagery real today, think about the chaos where there is gun violence in St. Paul and Minneapolis, chaos in political rallies gone amok, or in elementary classrooms where children may run wild. Wisdom delights in the chaos, because she can bring wisdom (not just “order”) to the chaos, with learning and insight, bringing God's presence even into the conflict! For wisdom comes not to control, but to find joy in others – like the little girl who visits the zoo, who laughs when God shows her a monkey or a giraffe. Wisdom is to delight in – not the desire to control – God's creation.

So let's move on to the Psalm, which asks the question “*Who am I?*” This past week was filled with beautiful, warm, sunny days and cool, calm nights. Last night after dark I looked up into the night sky and saw a beautiful, full moon, shining in the darkness. Hundreds of stars twinkled in the clear, cloudless sky. I thought of the words of my favorite psalm read today – Psalm 8 – “*When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have set in their courses, what are mere mortals that you should be mindful of them, human beings that you should care for them?*” Who hasn't thought this on a camping trip in the woods, whenever you look at the sky at night? So in the beauty of this world, and in nature's chaos, where do you see God? When have you thought “How majestic is your name in all the earth?” And haven't you also thought “Who am I” in all of this?

Another observation: this past Tuesday I was at a rally for Paid Family Leave on the lawn outside the State Office Building. The Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and the Senate majority leader were there. They each gave a speech. But that wasn't what made this memorable to me. It was the stories of suffering – critical illness in families, and the caregiving and sacrifices people make to take care of their loved ones, the choices they had to make when they wouldn't be paid if they didn't go to work. There was an overwhelming spirit of compassion and the desire to do what was right. There was this determination for us as a community of human beings to care for one another in suffering, and to care for the caregivers. I was reminded of this when I read the passage in our lesson from Romans chapter 5 – “*we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*”

So, where do you see God? Where do you see compassionate care in suffering? That's where God is. In assisted living, in hospitals, in care centers and in homes where families provide hospice care for loved ones. Where else? In

support groups like A.A., or Narcotics Anonymous. It's not in a doctrine, but in the living examples of compassion of loving care which humans give for one another, out of faith, hope and love - strengthened by the Holy Spirit. This is not a "concept", but a living force, a gift of God's love in the world!

We also find that Spirit which is found in the Truth. As Jesus said in the gospel of John today, "*When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.*" So where and when have you heard truth told recently? Where did it come from? I heard it last week in testimonies shared about what is required to care for those who are sick, and who are vulnerable. I heard truth yesterday at the Saint Paul Area Synod Assembly, when Joan Conroy introduced a resolution to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery of 1493. This is to correct the errors of the past when the Church taught that Christians had authorization from God to seize the lands of native peoples in the Americas who were not Christian. They took their lands, enslaved the people or removed them from their lands, killed them or infected them with disease, claiming their right as Christian nations to do so. The truth comes when such errors are challenged, when we are confronted with the evil that was done, when we confess our sins and amend our lives. This is the Spirit of Truth which comes from God. It often comes when we hear the cries of the victims or their descendants, who confront us with the hard truth, until we hear and acknowledge it, confess and repent. So when have you heard the truth in your life?

Now, this may be a different sermon for Trinity Sunday than you have heard before. Not so much a sermon than a collection of observations about where I have seen God's work in recent days, and how we might see God more clearly and personally if we open our eyes and use our imaginations. Because it's not about "getting our doctrine right" about the Trinity. It's about imagining God in more than one way - as Creator of this world and all that lives, in the compassion, forgiveness and self-giving love of God, and the powerful force of love and faith which blows through this world and on us - and in many other ways as well! Perhaps a Trinity - God in three persons - limits our imaginations too much! Adding Wisdom as being with God from the beginning adds a fourth person to this Trinity. But if God is infinite, there must be infinite other ways to imagine how God works in this world. With openness to such an infinite God, we might learn to understand each other much better, and how we all see and experience God in different ways!

So I encourage you to keep your eyes and ears open as you watch for God working in you and among us in this world. And may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.