

Trinity Sunday
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
30 May 2021

John 3:1-17

I have a wonderful little book edited by Nathan Ausubel, entitled, "A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People." There is a little story in this book I would like to share with you today:

All their lives the two young brothers had lived in the city behind great stone walls and never saw field nor meadow. But one day they decided to pay a visit to the country. As they went walking along the road, they saw a farmer at his plowing. They watched him and were puzzled. "What on earth is he doing that for?" they wondered. "He turns up the earth and leaves deep furrows in it. Why should someone take a smooth piece of land covered with nice green grass and dig it up?" Later they watched the farmer sowing grains of wheat along the furrows. "That man must be crazy!" they exclaimed. "He takes good wheat and throws it into the dirt." "I don't like the country!" said one in disgust. "Only crazy people live here." So, he returned to the city.

His brother who remained in the country saw a change take place only several weeks later. The plowed field began to sprout tender green shoots, even more beautiful and fresher than before. This discovery excited him very much. So, he wrote to his brother in the city to come at once and see for himself the wonderful change. His brother came and was delighted with what he saw. As time passed, they watched the sprouting grow into golden heads of wheat. Now they both understood the purpose of the farmer's work. When the wheat became ripe the farmer brought his scythe and began to cut it down. At this the impatient one of the two brothers exclaimed: "The farmer is crazy! He's insane! How hard he worked all these months to produce this lovely wheat, and now with his own hands he is cutting it down! I'm disgusted with such an idiot and I'm going back to the city!"

His brother, the patient one, held his peace and remained in the country. He watched the farmer gather the wheat into his granary. He saw him skillfully separate the grain from the chaff. He was filled with wonder when he found that the farmer had harvested a hundred-fold of the seed that he had sowed. Then he understood that there was logic in everything that the farmer had done.

The moral of the story: Mortals see only the beginning of any of God's works. Therefore, they cannot understand the nature and the end of creation.

In the Gospel from John last week Jesus said to the disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." There are truths about God that we cannot bear, we cannot understand. This statement from Jesus has proven to be true in

every generation of the Christian Church. Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Trinity, and although there is plenty of Biblical evidence for the idea that God is three persons in one, the Bible never mentions the word “Trinity.” The Trinity is one of those ideas Jesus did not say much about, perhaps because people of his day could not bear such an idea.

Jesus told us last week, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” The Holy Spirit will reveal a deeper understanding of God to the community as this Spirit leads the community into all truth. The Spirit will show the way forward and will declare all things as the Church is able to bear them. This is exactly what happened with the thinking around the Holy Trinity. The early believers began to see in Holy Scripture that God seems to behave in various distinct ways when relating to his creation. Sometimes he relates as Almighty Creator, Father of the nation and of Jesus, Liberator, Merciful Judge, Defender of his people, etc. In Jesus, God relates to his people as human-divine Messiah, Redeemer, Rescuer, Servant, and Friend. In His Holy Spirit, God relates to his creation as Personal Revealer (He reveals himself to us, he helps us understand who he is,) as Sanctifier (setting-aside the believers for the worship and service of God,) as Guide (leading believers into all truth,) as Proclaimer (who bears testimony about Christ and glorifies him,) and as Life-Force of the new community, always sending us into the world to proclaim God’s love and forgiveness for humanity in Jesus’ name.

When this community of faith began to identify these distinct roles of God, they began to think of these roles as persons, using the Latin word *Persona* or the Greek *Prosopon*. Both of these words came to mean “Character,” as in a role played by an actor. The same actor can play a number of roles or characters, each with distinct characteristics and personalities. In the same way, our forefathers saw three distinct persons in God, even though they knew that God was one, indivisible reality. Little by little this faith of the Christian community was taken on by the theologians who began to think and write about this deeper way of understanding God. Ignatius of Antioch, for example, exhorted obedience to “Christ, and to the Father, and to the Spirit” in a sermon written around 110 C.E. Origin ended some of his writings in the early Second Century, “In the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit.” Then, towards the end of the Second century, Theophilus of Antioch used the word “Trinity” for the first time.

What developed after this was a number of heresies about the Trinity. Some believed that there were three different gods sharing space, some believed that Jesus was “adopted” as God at his baptism but was not originally God. Some believed that the Holy Spirit was a separate God from the Father/Son Godhead. This went on for almost two centuries, until the first defense of the doctrine of the Trinity by Tertullian in the Third Century. His understanding of God in three persons, equal in substance, and co-eternal, was finally approved by the Nicene Fathers in their famous creed we pray every week.

My brothers and sisters, we may say that in the case of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, The Holy Spirit led us into deeper truth through the work of a committee or Church council. Maybe there is a value in church committees after all. What is important for us to remember today is that we only see the beginning of any of God's works. We cannot fully understand the nature and the end of creation. We are surrounded by ambiguity and mystery. I can no more fully understand the mystery of the Holy Trinity today than the authors of the Nicene Creed could in their day. We see plenty of evidence in Holy Scripture that God acts in various ways through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but we do not know much about the mysterious unity and diversity within the Trinity. For now, we must accept to live with this ambiguity, and we must be comfortable with this mystery, knowing that one day, the Spirit of God will reveal all truth and we will see God face to face in God's totality and full glory.

For now, let us be content with the knowledge that the same God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit loves us greatly as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, as we heard in the Gospel of John, Chapter 3 today. This God who is three persons in one reality, loves the world so much that he sends his only son into the world that all who believe in him might not perish but have everlasting life. We are dear in his eyes, and he will go through any extent to redeem us and to rescue us. Love is at the very heart of the Trinity. We may not understand much about how the Holy Trinity operates, but we know that God loves us and is willing to die for us. We know that he seeks a relationship with us. And we know that he sends his Holy Spirit to us every day to lead us home.

The rest is mystery! For now, we only see the beginning of God's work. We pray today that God's Holy Spirit will one day allow us see God as God is. Until then, may God give us the strength to be at peace even in the midst of ambiguity and mystery. Amen!