

Message
Trinity Sunday – May 29-30, 2010
Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15
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Peace, Hope and Love

A long time ago, in the early church, very thoughtful and prayerful people, who love the Lord, had a lot of ideas about what we should believe about God. Now, we still have those kinds of people today, always thinking of how best to understand the mystery of God in our lives. But, the early church got there first. So, around the 4th century, some 300 bishops gathered in Nicea, a city in Asia Minor, to come to some Christian theological agreement. The gathering was not without debate and controversy. What emerged from this Council of Nicea in 325 and later expanded at Constantinople in 381 is what we know today as our universal Christian creed, the Nicene Creed. The purpose of the Nicene Creed is the formal establishment of God as creator, Son as no less divine than the Father and the work of God's life flowing force given to us through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit; solidifying for us the revelation of a Trinitarian God: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Now, lots of things come in threes: Reading, writing, 'rithmetic; three sides to a triangle; three rings in a binder; Donald Duck's nephew's, Huey, Louie and Dewey; three peas in a pod; wheels on a tricycle; green light, yellow light, red light; the three wise men; the inner circle, Peter, James and John; the denial of Jesus; the women at the tomb on the third day; the words, "Lord, you know I love you"; and the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Today is what the church calls Trinity Sunday. Now, the doctrine of the Trinity is not something we spend a lot of time on in the church. It's just not coming up on our radar screen as the number one theological topic of concern these days. But, many fought and strived for the theological concept of a God who is sustainer, creator, God who is fully human and fully divine in the person of Jesus Christ and God and Jesus who breath upon us their life giving Holy Spirit. So, today, we remember how the early church fathers gathered at the council of Nicea to form for us our belief, a God of three persons and one in three.

We also remember this Memorial Day weekend, those who have gone before us defending what is just and right, in this country and across the globe; and we give thanks for their endurance, bravery and perseverance as they fought nobly; believing in what is true. They stood courageously. But, not without a cost. Also today, we hold these precious souls in our thoughts and prayers.

Defending what is just and right comes in many shapes and sizes. In Paul's letter to the church of Rome, he too struggles. Not unlike the early church pushing to unfold and teach the concept of one God in three persons, the apostle pushes to explain that faith in Jesus Christ, for both Jews and Gentiles, is the new faith of God's saving grace and mercy.

The apostle is passionate about growing the church west. So he strategizes to get to Spain by way of help from the Church of Rome. This journey is not without its troubles. Rome is the seat of unjust, oppressive imperial power. Roman officials are not interested in the righteous kingdom of God's saving grace known to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit. So, unlike any of his other letters, this letter, his longest and most complex, is a theology of sorts; ***a letter about God's passionate desire to heal a broken world, drawing it into a right relationship of love and forgiveness with God through Jesus Christ.***

We're reminded that Paul is a well educated, Jew, faithful to Judaic Law and custom. He knows well the story of his people; of God's covenant promise made by God to Abraham. Now he writes, however, of a new chapter in the story of God's people. God carves a new Law onto our hearts that includes not just the Israelites, but Gentiles as well. Paul writes of a just, righteous, saving relationship with God in Christ for all who have faith.

Keep in mind, that the apostle is most certainly a Christian, having experienced the much coveted "road to Damascus" experience. His message suggests a radical change in a Greco-Roman world characterized by the succinct divisions of materialism, the emotional detachment of stoicism, and the perception of an unchanging, inflexible God.

Now, because the church has claimed this Trinity Sunday as a high holy day, I could stand here for the next ten or fifteen minutes and enlighten you with concepts of the Trinity. (I see your eyes glazing over). So, instead, let's break apart three perennial themes that emerge in this fifth chapter of the apostle's letter to the Romans: ***peace, hope and love.***

Peace is a compassionate act of the heart. Peace is what comes in our anxious moments. Jesus forgives the sinful woman; as she wipes his feet he tells her to "go in peace." He instructs the disciples in the demands of their work, commissioning them to keep their peace upon them, and to give it away. At his resurrection, he comforts the frightened disciples hidden behind closed doors, with the words "peace be with you."

In Hebrew, the word for peace is shalom, used more than 200 times in the bible. Rather than the opposite of war, Shalom is the absence of war and the establishment of God's order out of chaos. Peace, shalom, is also associated with wellness and well being; a way of life. Peace is the action taken against oppression, deceit, fraud and all those pieces that threaten human life. In kingdom living we know peace; where the lion will lie down with the lamb, no hurt and no harm will be done for all will be full of the knowledge of God (Isaiah 11).

The peaceful kingdom of God is the opposite of the imperial kingdom dictated by the injustice and oppression of the Roman government. Peace is God's act of ***reconciliation*** made for us through Jesus, his dying on the cross for us, and rising again with the promise of new life for us. Peaceful kingdom living is the result of divine activity, God's saving grace for us...a peace that passes all understanding. As Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, our salvation hinges on the peace within and throughout our community.

The apostle isn't telling us we must achieve peace...he's telling us that because of Jesus Christ, peace is established, and we live in a state of fulfillment and freedom.

Easier said than done, right? Because when there is turmoil, distrust, and hurt, we struggle to maintain peace. Jesus never said walking the walk would be easy. He tells us to pick up our cross and follow, to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, that our perseverance will win us our lives...but we will be betrayed by parents and brothers, relations and friends...We suffer and anguish. The apostle reminds us that our suffering is character building. So, take a deep breath fellow sufferers; swallow hard. There's more to the character building.

The apostle preaches and teaches in a climate of classic Stoicism; where sucking it up, and offering the stiff upper lip is the mode of operation. Perseverance and endurance in suffering are valuable traits for traveling down a dusty and dirty road marked with the potholes of shame, humiliation and disgrace. Life is packed with pressures, difficulties, and loneliness. But, here's the flip. As followers of Christ, we live with the trust that our sufferings are in the hands of a merciful and tender God. Suffering does not defeat. We live with hope.

You've heard us talk a lot about our commitment to help the people of Haiti. In a few weeks we'll host our CARITAS guests, providing not just shelter, but a safe home for several dozen men and women for the week. This weekend we remember those who have gone before us, given their lives defending peace, enduring great hardship, defending what is just and right. These are sufferers, endur-ers, those who persevere, with hope. These folks walk the walk, not knowing exactly what the outcome will be, but in the knowledge that God's promise for us will set us free.

We live by faith, with hope and hope does not disappoint. Hope does not let us down. Hope is grounded in the love of God, in Christ, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit and gives courage and reassurance in the struggle. Hope is not a passive emotion. Hope is the action of expectation that lets us know God's love. There's nothing we can do or say to earn this love. God decided at creation to pour God's love upon us and into us.

Saint Teresa of Avila tells us, "the important thing is not to think much but to love much." So, we ask, how do we love much? Jesus tells us about three ways to love much: *love God, love our neighbor and love ourselves*. We can't love God and our neighbor if we don't first begin to grasp the abundance of love God has for our very own self.

For accomplished, successful author, Maya Angelou, it took some convincing. She tells the story of her teacher and mentor. He asks Angelou to read aloud to him from the classic text by H. Emilie Cady, Lessons in Truth. Angleou reads and concludes with the words, "God loves me," and closes the book. Her teacher demands that she read again. Angelou, obedient, reads again, ending with, "God loves me." The teacher instructs again, for Angelou to read. Finally after somewhere around seven repetitions ending with, "God loves me," Angleou says, *"...I began to sense that there might be truth in the statement, that there was a possibility that*

God really did love me. Me, Maya Angelou. I suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all. I knew that if God loved me, then I could do wonderful things. I could try great things, learn anything, achieve anything.” (Sweet, The Hardest Words, p. 108).

The apostle John, reminds us that “...God lives in us and his love is perfected in us...we abide in him and he in us.” ***We are called by name, from the very beginning of creation, made God’s most beloved...God rests his favor upon us...and claims us with the words, from the depths of the earth we are molded and knitted together by God in the womb of our mother. We are carved into the palms of God’s hands and cradled tenderly in the shadow of God’s embrace. God says to us, “You are mine, just as you are. May I be yours. Remember, nothing can change the love I have for you.”***

Mystic Julian of Norwich calls us to respond to God’s love, by living gladly. So, we reach out to be witnesses, believers of God’s peace, hope and love.

I imagine, there’s hardly a day that goes by that we don’t declare statements of belief. “I believe today will be a good day.” “I believe my test will go well.” I believe my car will get me back and forth. I believe I’ll feel success at work. I believe humankind is good. As the church, we declare what we believe in the words of the Nicene Creed: God the father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, three in one and one in three. But, the truth is, what we believe is not necessarily what we see or what we know. And we know a lot. We know the earth is round. We know that $4 \times 3 = 12$. We know Paris is the capital of France. We know chocolate tastes good, that babies are precious and ***that God loves us***. Our knowledge, however, doesn’t necessarily give us certainty. This is what the apostle writes of in his letter to the church of Rome. Because God believes in us, because God trusts us, we live in what we don’t see, and trust with faith that the redeeming love of Jesus Christ equips us, to be witnesses of peace, hope and love.

These newborn Christians, have challenges in carving out a new understanding of power. The apostle writes to these Christians to look in their own backyard; to pay careful attention to how God is working in their neighborhood. They’ll practice careful listening, that leads to peace making. They’ll risk vulnerability and honesty because they’re grounded in the saving certainty of, hope. They’ll engage in compassionate conversation and action that models God’s abundant love. This is how the kingdom of truth is born to the church in Rome. Today, as faithful followers we are commissioned with the same opportunity; to be kingdom builders of peace, hope and love. On faith, might we can ask the very same question, ***what is God up to in our neighborhood?***

How do we want to practice the peace of reconciliation, the promise of hope and the liberty of love, right here, in our own backyard? Because, the truth is, often, living like Jesus with those closest is where we’re most challenged; most vulnerable; where practicing peace, hope and love asks the best of us.

So, here’s the good news. We’re flooded with the Holy Spirit, from God in Christ with a love and compassion that takes us soaring. So, we go

forth, faithful in the grace of our God, who makes himself known as three in one in every waking and sleeping moment of our existence, now and for all eternity. With peace, hope and love, we go boldly, serving always in his name, forever giving thanks. Amen.