

Language about God (i.e. Trinity) a sermon by the Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church June 7, 2009

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

THIS PAST WEEK I wrote a summary of our church for use in a workshop. Two Presbytery Committees--Healthy Congregations and the Committee on Ministry--were looking at various churches through the rubric of Mission, Ministry, Money, and Members.

I was not at the workshop, but I am told the first thing the NVM small group reported was, "Wow, this must be one tired pastor!" The second thing they said was, "We see no mention of Jesus or a Christ-centered mission." This brought me up short. When I managed to put aside my initial defensiveness; I had to admit that we are a congregation -- myself included -- that turns the old adage upside down: We have a much harder time talking our faith than walking our faith. I think we do understand ourselves as a Jesus-led congregation with a Christ-centered, mission. I think we truly do live into Gospel call -- whether we name it that or not.

But then we encounter Trinity Sunday --the only designated Sunday in the Christian year that focuses upon a doctrine rather than a story of what God does, and what God calls us to do-- we become uncomfortable. Our Sunday School kids forgot that Jesus was part of the Trinity, an incarnation of God. We shun Lord and Savior language. And when we are so faithfully and genuinely inclusive about our God language, we often end up blurring the distinctions and talking about God far more than Jesus or Spirit. We are fine with Jesus as fully human but we have trouble with the fully divine. No wonder we are not good at inviting or evangelizing. A doctrine requires us to claim the essential expression of our faith. Trinity Sunday asks us to use words, specific words, words that not only define who God is, --words that define who we are as well.

Since the beginning of the third century the doctrine of the Trinity has been stated as "the one God exists in three Persons and one substance, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." The early church explained that the God of the Gospel is a Triune God, one God who is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God who is eternally three persons in relationship with one another. St. Basil of Caesarea called it "a community of essence, a God whose one life is a relationship, an essential unity of a communion of love."

Do you find this framework helpful to you in this day and age? It actually IS helpful to me. Sometimes it is actually fun: When Book Group read Paul Young's *The Shack*, we were enthralled with the personification of Trinity – Creator God as an effusive embracing African American woman called Papa; Jesus as a work-a-day carpenter, Spirit as an ephemeral shimmering sprite We were also fascinated by the relationship between the three, a perfect non-hierarchical community where each was separate but each was part of the other.

However many find the doctrine of Trinity outdated, more confusing than compelling. It is not critical for you to use Trinitarian language to understand God. Unless you are like the apocryphal preacher who promised to "unscrew the inscrutable," Trinitarian language is no better at describing God than any other system of rational thought. Karen Armstrong's great book, *A History of God* makes it clear how utterly unimaginable God always remains, and how utterly inadequate is every formulation that attempts to picture the inconceivable.

Still it remains critical to have a way of talking about God, words to frame your relationship with God, and God's relationship with you. How you talk about God --who God is -- will have a lot to do with how you claim yourself as Christian.

It seems to me that was Nicodemus' problem as well. He was a Pharisee, a man well-versed in the scriptures and gifted as a teacher or Rabbi. But he was restless. He had questions. Somehow Jesus had disturbed him, piqued him, challenged his static way of observing the law and teaching the Torah. He came looking for new words, new understandings.

He came as Nik at Night. Perhaps he was ashamed to be seen with Jesus in the daylight. Perhaps he just thought he could have more access to Jesus at night, or, as a rabbi, it may simply have been his custom to retire to study the law in the evening. Perhaps it was John's way of portraying Jesus as the light in the darkness. The point is, Nicodemus was very interested in knowing God. It had everything to do with his own identity.

The answer Jesus gave was long, thorough, and quite Trinitarian in nature if not in exact language. It is an important answer. At this exact point of the narrative, the singular "you" addressing Nicodemus changes to the plural "you." This message is for all of us. .

God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Period

I think we are Nicodemus - trying hard to grasp something that we still struggle to understand, embody, embrace. And like Nicodemus, sometimes we give up and walk away. Nicodemus is so close yet so far

Nicodemus asked Jesus, how can anyone start over? How can anyone learn to live differently? How can I change? Jesus says, Nicodemus, you can't - not on your own. You need God's help. You need God's Spirit to give you new life. You need God's love to surround you and make you one of his children.

In Romans, Paul changes the language with the metaphor of adoption –he talks about the choice and commitment of God to love us unconditionally. Again, this may not resonate with everyone. But it certainly resonates in a story told by preacher and author Fred Craddock. He and his wife were eating at the Big Bear Inn in eastern Tennessee. An older man sauntered over to their table and said, "Good evening. Y'all on vacation?" "Yes," said the Craddocks. When the stranger learned that Fred taught at a seminary, he said, "Oh - you teach preachers! I have a story about a preacher," and the man pulled up a chair.

The old man said, "I was born back in these mountains. My mother was not married, and the reproach that fell on her, fell on me. The children at school had a name for me and it hurt a lot. During recess I would go hide in the weeds until the bell rang. When I went to town with my mother, the men and women would stare at her, and then they would look at me. It was a painful time. I guess I was in 7th or 8th grade when I started to go hear a preacher. In a way he frightened me, and in another way I was attracted. When he spoke, he thundered. I was afraid that people would say 'what's a boy like that doing in church?' so I would go in just in time for the sermon and then I would rush out. One Sunday, however, some women lined up in line and I wasn't able to get out. I began to sweat and get cold and I wondered, 'Oh no, somebody's going to say to me, what's a boy like you doing in church?'" Just then I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked out of the corner of my eye and saw the preacher! The preacher looked straight at me and stared into my face. And then he said, 'Boy, I know who you are... I know who your father is. You're a child of... you're a child of... you're a child of God. I see a striking resemblance!' Then he patted me on the shoulder and said, 'Go claim your inheritance, son.' At that, the old man got up to leave. Fred Craddock asked, "What's your name, sir?" The old man turned and said, "Ben Hooper." Ben Hooper who had served as Governor of Tennessee for two terms!

Words matter.

Whether you use the word Trinity or not, you are God's beloved, created and held as God's own, in the spirit of adoption. Out of that love, Jesus came to save us from ourselves, to heal us and help us, to demonstrate the absolute promise that there is always light in the darkness, always hope of renewal and rebirth, And the Spirit is with us to bring that about, to enable and empower if we but ask and surrender, if we are not only responsible but responsive.

When you claim the Trinity you also claim something about yourself. A “person” is not an isolated “individual,” but one whose very being is communion. We are drawn into true personhood, growing in our love of God and others while still being distinct as ourselves in this mysterious communion.

Language is critical to claiming our own identity. To borrow another line from *The Shack*, language helps us “learn to live loved.” It is, I think, the journey of grace that we Christians are on. “Learning to live loved” is the transformation of our lives - our attitudes - our relationships with other - our call to ministry and to justice. “Learning to live loved” is understanding in the depths of our hearts what it means to be children of God and what it is to see others in our community in the same way. “Learning to live loved” will let us talk about our faith in open, compelling, inviting, ways, because it will be more genuine

. May it be so for you, and for me. Amen