

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“An Unprofessional God”

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John 16:12-15

12 'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Isaiah 55:8-11

*⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.*

*⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

*¹⁰For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,*

*¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

One Sunday on their way home from church, a little girl turned to her mother and said, “Mommy, the preacher’s sermon this morning confused me.” The mother, who was never, ever confused by a minister’s sermon replied, “Oh, why is that dear?” The little girl explained, “Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. Is that true?” The mother answered, “Yes, God is bigger than we are.” The girl continued, “Then he said that God lives in us. Is that true?” The mother assured his daughter, “Yes that also is true.” The girl paused and then went on, “Well if God lives in us and yet is bigger than us, wouldn’t God stick out of us?”

A number of years ago a friend asked to speak with me about an important decision that she was considering. She felt she was being called to ministry and wanted my advice about what seminaries might be best for her to contemplate. I told her that I would be glad to listen to her thoughts and to her feelings, but remembering the poor and hurtful advice I had received when I was in the same situation years earlier, I would refrain from giving her advice about specific seminaries. I wanted to be professional. I told her that she needed to make her decision about seminary based on her own personal investigation. Toward the end of our conversation, the woman mentioned the name of the school that she was leaning toward attending, even though

she had not seen the place. She said it came highly recommended by others. When I heard the name of the school I immediately reconsidered my pledge of silence. You see I knew that particular seminary was not right for her background and her theology, as I understood it. And so I broke my promise and I told her of my opinion. I told her that I thought she needed to continue her search and to personally visit the seminary before deciding. When she heard my words she seemed a bit confused, perhaps even hurt that I had broken my promise. I felt badly myself. But in the midst of that situation I could not simply keep my distance. I cared enough about her and her future plans that I just had to tell her how I really felt.

Professional distance is a problem for some professions. Consider the wisdom of the old saying, "A lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client." I have been told that doctors, for the most part, are better off not treating members of their own family. As clergy, we are taught to be close enough to the members of our church to care, but distant enough to objectively and dispassionately consider, reflect, and advise. I have found that it doesn't work real well. Professional distance may be the sought-after ideal. But when one cares, professional distance is usually left behind.

In his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, South African bishop Desmond Tutu writes of the meaning of the Nguni language word ubuntu. He describes its meaning as "my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound, in yours." Tutu adds that ubuntu is presence that does not threaten others but creates a sense of self-assurance that comes from knowing that your life and the life of those to whom you relate belong in to community of the greater whole. It is a relational concept. You relate to others by letting them know that both of you are part of God's good plan.

All of this brings me to the theme of the day, Trinity Sunday. You noticed we sang the great Trinitarian hymn as our processional song, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty." Talking about the Trinity is never easy. God is one and yet we've got three. And are these three persons or spirits or beings or just things? I've known colleagues who stand in the pulpit on Trinity Sunday with three leaf clovers, triangles, eggs (shell, white and yoke are one, don't you know!), or apple (which is at once tree, fruit and seed). Some ministers speak of the Trinity as the sun (star, ray and light). Others use water as ice, steam, and liquid. My favorite interpretation, one I share with the Confirmation class is given by David H.C. Read. He says the Trinity is God - everywhere and always, Christ- God then and there, and Holy Spirit- God here and now. One minister calls this day the "annual recurrence of the persistent attempt to make sense of an abstraction that is probably a greater stumbling block and folly than the cross." There is no Biblical narrative to ground us in history and fact. As a result Trinity Sunday becomes a day to celebrate an idea, a glimpse into God's personality as it is revealed to us.

Back in the fourth century, there was a hot debate in the Christian church about whether or not Jesus the Christ was really God. One side said that God was so powerful and great that God could never be a mere mortal. If God were to be God, God needed to be separate from those less than angels. If God were involved in the lives of mortal creatures like us, then God would have to soil the holy hands of the divine.

On the other side came the argument that eventually made its way into official church doctrine. These supporters argued that Jesus was indeed God who had come to earth and shared with us our humanity. The mark of divinity is not distance from mortals or isolation from human experience. The characteristics of the divine are

communication, presence, giving, and sacrifice. All that God is and all that God has was given to Jesus the Son, and to the Helper- the Holy Spirit, so that we human being can somehow experience all that God is and has.

The Trinity then is really just a way to describe how God works. It is an image that portrays the various relationships that God has with humanity. The Trinity reveals the creative God that was and always is, the ethical God that in Jesus showed us how to live, and the mystical God who in Spirit communicates with us in worship and prayer today. The Trinity is a way to describe a God who does not worry about keeping a professional distance. This is a God who stoops to our level, who never stops giving, who welcomes us gladly, who desires our prayers and our praise, and who supports us through good deeds and shortcomings.

There is a wonderful story about the famous Jewish scholar Dov Ber. He was an uncommon man, a teacher of the highest reputation, a man of the letters, but most inflexible and uncompromising in his doctrine. When people came into Dov Ber's presence, they trembled in fear. He never laughed. He firmly believed that the only way to find God was through discipline and a harsh physical and spiritual regiment. He lived a separate and austere life, fasting for days in search of God's presence. One day Dov Ber fell ill and there was nothing the doctors could do to cure him. As a final resort they suggested that he see a famous Jewish healer named Baal Shem Tov. Dov Ber agreed, even though he strongly disapproved of Baal Shem's methods. You see, Baal Shem believed one could find purpose in life only through the spirit of rejoicing and play. And Dov Ber though Baal Shem was a heretic. One night however, as Dov Ber visited Baal Shem, Baal Shem handed the old, serious man the holy book and asked him to read it. He had hardly read for a minute when Baal Shem interrupted saying, "Something is missing. Something is lacking in your faith." Dov Ber was puzzled. "What could it be," he asked. "I have been seeking God through all the right learning and discipline." "Soul," said the Baal Shem Tov. "The Lord required faith to have soul. To have faith you must do more than know about God. You must also know God."

Christian theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, "A good sermon enables the Risen Christ to walk among his people." He was right. A sermon at its best is the means for God to personally intrude and stroll through the lives, questions, and concerns of the people. The doctrine of the Trinity is supposed to have that same effect upon our understanding of God. It may be a mathematical formula that is far beyond our comprehension. It may seem so logically ridiculous that we simply choose to ignore it. Yet generations of believers have found that the celebration of God as Father and Son and Holy Spirit, or Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer is exactly what is needed to give soul and meaning and flesh to the very presence of God in our lives and our world. The God that is described in the Trinity is never at a professional distance. The God of the Trinity is always busy relating with us, communicating with us, and inspiring us. God's strength is not in keep a safe distance and hiding in logic and formulas. Our God is personal and encounter us in all things.