

Vision 2020: Alive
Romans 8: 12-25, John 3:1-9
Rev. Anne Weirich, May 27, 2018
Trinity Sunday

A group of us clergy were meeting the other day out at Old Washington Church. We were having a discussion about whether or not there were things about ourselves, things about the church, that need to be re-interpreted these days.

For example, one pastor said that he was walking home and got within a few blocks of his house. This pastor regularly wears a clergy collar. That day, his shirt was light blue, oxford cloth - with a white clergy tab. A young boy, who he'd not seen before, came up and said, "Hey, who are you? Are you the mailman?" We all laughed. The pastor said, he replied, "No, I'm your neighbor." But it got him to thinking about the fact few people recognize some of the more traditional signs of the Christian faith.

One of the things we all felt pretty strongly about was how to re-introduce the cross to the 21st century here in the US. The cross has

become jewelry and fashion in a big way. Its powerful meaning has been erased as a fashion accessory.

For a great deal of the world lives in the times that Paul writes about in his letter to the church in Rome. We, too, are “caught up in the sufferings of this present time.” The great crescendo of Chapter 8 lists them for us... “hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword” all plague our world no less today than they did in Paul’s time. We, too, are filled with groans. We too want to be truly alive and not to be subject to “life according to the flesh.”

Paul reminds us that God is not the divine cause of pain. We are not called to look for pain. We don’t put ourselves on the cross - in abusive situations, or look for sorrow and pain because that’s what God requires of us. No, rather Paul argues here in Romans that painful things in life will happen without us seeking them out. When these painful things do happen on their own, Paul reminds us that, this where we meet God. God sends the Spirit to pray in us, too, with “sighs too deep for words.” God adopts us into God and we call God “Abba,” as Jesus

called God Abba. God gives us glory - even as we are joined to Jesus in suffering. This is the meaning of the cross that has been lost to fashion.

The vision 2020 team of the PCUSA embraced this for our denomination in the final word of their proposal. We are A - ALIVE!

- We are a people of the resurrection: though death surrounds us, we are not afraid because we follow the One who was raised from the tomb.

Now, I want to get back to the clergy meeting at Old Washington. Because our discussion about all this eventually brought us to the life of the Triune God as a way to speak to the world about the cross.

One of the basic things we believe about the Trinity is perhaps best expressed by the Christian theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

He said,

“God glorifies himself in man. That is the ultimate secret of the Trinity. The humanity is taken up into the Trinity.

The glorification of God in the flesh is now at the same time, the glorification of man, who shall have life through eternity with the trinitarian God.” (*Christ*

the Center,
p. 105)

HarperSanfrancisco, 1978,

That is good news my friends. Through God's work on the cross, we also exist in the new life - Triune life - eternal life. But, we wondered, how do we get that good news to a world that hears the word "God," and imagines anything but the three persons of the Trinity? How do we take a piece of jewelry and restore the power it has to convey the work of the Triune God - glory, eternity and new life? How does this play in a world that is increasingly without faith?

How can the Trinity help us to faithfully remain present to those who suffer?

Because, ironically, though it is the hoped for future that pulls a person of faith through the present time, the future is little or no comfort to those who suffer in the present moment - whether filled with faith or not.

I think that the key lies in something Paul tells us. He uses the word “patience.” He says, “...if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

So - here we are. We have, on the one hand, The Trinity - perhaps the most enigmatic of doctrines. Talk about a clergy collar.

And we have patience - a rare quality in these days of instant gratification.

And let’s not forget the cross....

How can these all come together and help us bring new life to a world of people who groan and suffer?

To answer that, I want spend the rest of our time looking at 2 stories. The first is an image of the Trinity given to Julian of Norwich - a Christian mystic of the late 1300s. Julian received this vision from Jesus. She wrote,

....he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand...and it was as round as a ball....In this little thing I saw three

properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God preserves it. But what did I see in it? It is that God is the Creator and the protector and the lover. *(Revelations of*

Divine Love, Oxford University Press:

Oxford, 2015, p. 45.)

The thing that I really like about these names for the Trinity is that when it is combined with Paul and Bonhoeffer's idea that humanity is made part of of God - adopted into God - then we, too, are as included as that round vaguely hazelnut thing. We are God's creation, protected and loved.

When we enter deeply into this image, we understand that this inclusion in God's protection and love extends from the small globe to the whirling planets and stars - to all people.

The Vision 2020 folks said it like this

- The Holy Spirit gives us courage to build a community that reflects the fullness of God's image in humanity: beautifully diverse and no longer divided by age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender

identity, sexuality, physical and mental ability, geography, or theological conviction.

Is there a way to get this good news to all people? Is there a way for those of us with faith to build this community as an expression of the the Triune God? Can we get to the point where when we say the word “God,” people think of Creator, Protector and Lover? And know that each one of them and all creation is a part of and alive in such a wondrous relationship?

I think so - if we pay attention to what happens to Nicodemus.

Nicodemus teaches us, I think, about patience. Not his patience - but the patience of the Triune God.

Nicodemus is a seeker. He’s seen Jesus’ miracles - the healings. And even though he has a comfortable place as a Pharisee in the Jewish world, he wonders enough to seek Jesus out.

He doesn’t come in the light of day, but in the dark of night.

Nicodemus can be likened to those of us with faith, I think, who are comfortable with our faith, who reach out to God more when the

darkness falls and we need more answers. Nicodemus might also be likened to folks without any faith at all - who need answers.

In John's gospel, however, Jesus is skeptical of those who come to him only because of the outward signs of his power. Earlier, in Chapter 2, we hear that he didn't "trust himself" to those who came to believe in him because of "the signs he was doing." (2:23-4)

So when Nicodemus comes, Jesus confounds him with a challenge to new life. You have to be born from above - born again. The Greek here can mean both - and probably do mean both.

Nicodemus stays with the challenge and asks more questions. And Jesus continues to draw him into new life by chipping away at the notions about God that brought Nicodemus to see him.

There is no rejection of Nicodemus, no condemnation.

An option for a new life is offered. Meaning, the old life must be discarded. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to believe in God in a new way.

Peter Rollins, who writes about the ways the church is emerging these days, suggests that we consider the possibility of moving from the idea of orthodoxy as "right believing" to seeing orthodoxy as "believing

in the right way." (*How (Not) to Speak of God*, Paraclete Press: Brewster, MA, 2006, p. 2.) This subtle shift can have powerful implications for understanding that the Christian faith is about a way of believing rather than a means of believing things about the world.

I think we hear Jesus saying this to Nicodemus. Don't get stuck in my literal words. Of course grown men can't enter their mother's bodies and be born again...

But let the Spirit enter you - and you will rise through the waters to new life. A life of the Spirit.

We get the fuller impact of this when we keep reading in the story. Jesus shifts to a monologue about who he is. He traces his own death and rise to new life.

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.

Nicodemus - I will be lifted up like the healing serpent of Moses in the desert. I have come for the healing of the whole world - not just these few you have seen. This is the way of believing you are called to.

The wholeness and healing that is given to us in Christ is what lifts us up and makes us alive in a new way.

We can **believe** in a new way. Which I think is a way that helps us be as patient as Jesus with a world which lives in darkness and has no answers to questions about death and suffering.

We see this new belief come alive in Nicodemus.

Nicodemus appears three times in John's gospel. This time and two others. And if we watch him, we see that he is, finally, able to "believe the right way." The Spirit **created** something new in Nicodemus. After this, he returns in the light of day. He tries to **protect** Jesus - and defends Jesus at his trial. (7:50-51) Finally, he comes in **love**, as the one who would, like a mother or father, to prepare Jesus' body for burial. (19:39).

I think Nicodemus teaches us what it means to be adopted into the life of the Triune God. He shows us that God creates, protects and loves

us. of the one we call Abba, Son and Spirit is also the one who is endlessly patient with us. Because we are lifted up - born again and again into the wholeness and brightness of renewed life.

Nicodemus shows us that as a part of the Triune God in these ways, we, in response, must be as endlessly creative, protective, loving and patient. This is how we share the good news in a new way of believing. This is how we see the whole world brought out of the darkness into the light.

Using our new way of believing we can also understand that Nicodemus can be an image of how the whole church is called to be born again, born anew throughout the generations.

The closing words of Vision 2020 - the final words about being ALIVE reflect on this Nicodemus path for the church...

- In the sure and certain hope of resurrection, we testify that the Church and its members are called to follow Christ's model by risking all, even life itself, for the sake of the Gospel.

The last two weeks, I traveled across the United Kingdom and listened to the Muskingum choir sing in many spectacular places.

We also visited places of worship that were as old as Stonehenge and as new as a restaurant and coffee shop brightly featured in an old church in Cambridge. Its small sanctuary was preserved for Sunday worship behind a wall of glass.

Some of the churches we passed by were ruins. Others were soaring medieval structures whose construction took 120 years. Many were destroyed by fire or The Blitz and rebuilt upon the ashes. Others were built on much older foundations - encompassing spaces where people worshipped when the faith came there in the 3rd or 4th century.

Most were primarily sustained by tourists rather than congregations.

I found the most hope in the cathedrals built on ruins, I think. Whenever the choir raised their young voices in those ancient spaces, the songs doing their best to soar into the vaults and hammer at the coves and curves and domes, to break through into the world - I felt great hope. They made these old places alive with possibility.

It seems we have company - good company - as the saints of those days must have stood and watched as their churches tumbled into stone

and mortar dust. They, too must have wondered, how do we rebuild from here?

As I listened to the choir, I came away thinking, maybe it's time to turn away from the brick and mortar, the soaring, glorious spaces, the things of this earth. Maybe this time we will build a house **created** from newborn, living stones which can stand and **protect**, like Nicodemus did for Jesus in the dock. Which can show **love** by walking through all suffering, even unto death, as Nicodemus did at Jesus' tomb.

A living, breathing house of the Triune God... For all.