

“Beyond the Numbers Game”:
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on May 30th 2010 (Trinity Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Romans 5: 1-5

It doesn't take a rocket-scientist, to figure out why this particular passage of scripture was chosen for this particular Sunday morning. Although it *does* help if you are willing to do a wee bit of cutting and pasting: not unlike the cutting and pasting I did when I put together the little scrap of scripture you'll find in the bulletin underneath my sermon title. From verse one: ...*we have peace with **God** through our Lord Jesus **Christ***, juxtaposed with this from verse five: *through the **Holy Spirit** that has been given to us.*

God. Christ. Spirit. Count 'em! God. Christ. Spirit. Three in all...three in one. Welcome! Welcome to Trinity Sunday.

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Perhaps more than any other Sunday in the church's calendar, Trinity Sunday threatens to unsettle clergy and laity alike. If there is any church doctrine—any church teaching—that leaves most of the laity scratching their heads, it's the teaching about Trinity. And yes: if there is any topic—any theological theme—that leaves would-be preachers ready and set to run for cover, it's the theme of Trinity.

And, to be fair, there is nothing especially new to any of that, especially not in liberal Protestant theological circles. The greatest of 19th century Protestant theologians—Friedrich Schleiermacher—relegated the doctrine of the Trinity to an appendix in his major theological work. In the 20th century, the great Paul Tillich had little more use for the doctrine than had Schleiermacher. On the other hand, contrarian that he was, Karl Barth—in his magnum opus—treated the Trinity as the foundation and the framework for his entire theological project. Amazingly, Barth's approach was the one to win out, at least for a while, causing many theologians in the second half of the 20th century to re-consider the centrality of Trinity to Christian life and thought, despite the fact that it tends to be an irritant especially to Christians of a progressive stripe. But where, precisely, does all of that leave you and me?

Well: I don't know where it leaves *you*, but I know it leaves me eager to avoid getting caught up in the numbers game. On Trinity Sunday we can so easily find ourselves playing that game, somehow celebrating the special properties of the number three, as if we were a community that strangely gathers, once a year, to worship a number. God spare us! And yet! Let's not make the opposite mistake of denying the undeniable, namely this:

The doctrine of the Trinity, as it evolved over the first five or six centuries of Christian history, was one of the genuine foundation-stones of Christian life and thought. No matter how bizarre that may strike some of us, that is an undeniable fact about the early Church: a fact that ought to give us pause. Because what is true of human life and thought in general, is most certainly true of Christian thought about the Trinity: namely, that it is founded upon the lived experience... *the lived experience*... of human beings, in the case of the Trinity human beings who happen to be Christians. Bloodlessly abstract and, at times, obsessively mathematical though talk of Trinity can become, like most things human, such talk begins (and ends) with human experience... the lived experience of men and women who discovered that Triune speech—speech about Trinity—could help them to make sense of their experience of God.

And so... as a way of following in their footsteps... and as a first decisive step, let's recognize that most of us, like countless souls who have gone before us, are aware of the magnificence of the created order. Indeed, if you are anything like me, new scientific discoveries—quarks, quanta and quasars—far from driving the sense of wonder from your soul, only serve to deepen your sense that the world is, from head to toe, miracle upon miracle upon miracle. And yes, if you are anything like me, you will have trouble shaking the intuition that the miracle and the mystery of creation are grounded in something tangibly and wonderfully real. Call that something by a proper philosophical name: call it the Ground or the Source, call it the Foundation or the Fountainhead. Or call that something by a more personal, intimate, familiar name: call it Abba as was Jesus' custom, call it "Our Father" as the Lord's Prayer invites us to do, call it Mother as many contemporary Christians choose to do, or name it simply as the One. Whichever name you use, however, recognize that you are thereby giving expression to a conviction that goes way beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition, and yet a conviction that is nowhere more acutely expressed than through the opening verses of the Judeo-Christian's Bible: *In the beginning. In the beginning God created. In the beginning God!*

If the reality of creation provides one experiential foundation to belief in God—our beliefs about God—a second source involves the experience of recognizing that we are, in some hard to explain way, never left to our own devices as we journey through life. As with our awareness of God as the Source of our Being, the experience of God's intimate guidance—God's spiritual guidance—transcends the specifics of our Judeo-Christian tradition. To take an especially noteworthy example: the great pre-Christian philosopher, Socrates, claimed throughout his life, to have a spirit... a deeply personal spirit that governed and guided all of his living, and all of his thinking. And while most of us will be reluctant to claim the mantle of the great Socrates, all of us (if we are paying attention) have had similar experiences. Active in our conscience... at work in our discernment when we face difficult decisions... behind the scenes when a chance encounter brings an important person into our lives... shaping us in ways we rarely so much as notice let alone fathom, there is—as one of our favourite hymns insists—a spirit in the air. Side by side with our recognition of the God of the beginning—the One we name as Source of all that ever was, ever is and ever will be—side by side with that

intuition, stands a recognition of the God within and among us, the One we most characteristically name as Spirit. Along with those of other faith traditions, we recognize (as did Christians almost from the outset) the power and persistence of the Spirit.

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Those of you who are keeping score will realize that we are 2/3rds of the way toward our destination, although you may also be aware that I am taking a rather odd route to get there. I've tried to name the kind of experience that is behind our talk of the One generally named as *first* person of the Trinity: **Source** of all that is, the One to whom Jesus prayed as Abba! I've also tried to name the kind of experience that is behind our talk of the One generally named as *third* person of the Trinity: **Spirit** that animates and stirs within and amongst us. Which means that I've neglected, so far, the middle piece: the One Christian experience has tended to name as the *second* person...the *second* person of the Trinity. And there's a reason for that. Perverse though that may seem, there's a reason for my leaving the middle term for last.

It has to do with experience...the experience that stands behind talk of Trinity, indeed, the sort of experience that stands behind *any* human talk about God. We experience the grandeur of creation, and somehow we become aware of the Creator. We experience the unmistakable promptings of a voice not our own and somehow become aware of the Spirit. Those are important Christian experiences...but they are not experiences on which we have the market cornered. It's not that all people believe in a Creator and it's not that all people believe in the Spirit. But I submit that all people have experiences that might lead them to *ponder* the possibility of Creator, to ponder the reality of Spirit, even if their pondering leads them, at the end of the day, to different conclusions. But the central plank in the Triune mystery is the plank that bears a unique relationship to distinctively *Christian* God-talk: the piece without which talk of Trinity would never have arisen in the first place.

It has to do with the fact that Jesus prayed to God...and yet somehow—recent research indicates this happened in an astonishingly short time after his death—somehow his followers came to the conclusion that Jesus' owning praying to God notwithstanding, that they had—in the very process of encountering Jesus—come face to face with God. Through his teaching....through his healing...through his living...above all, through his dying and his rising! That was the core experience...that was the core experience, more than any other, which gave birth to talk of Trinity.

And frankly...frankly...minus that experience of Jesus, we would not be on the receiving end of a piece of scripture like the one we heard from Romans, with its emphasis on suffering. Writing of the glories of the Christian life, Paul takes an odd but hardly uncharacteristic turn. The Christian life is so wonderful, according to Paul that *we even boast in our sufferings. Knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.* All of which sounds terribly upbeat, but not all of which rings true in each and every episode of suffering we are privy to in our day to day lives. Every person in this room knows full well that

sometimes suffering produces not endurance but anger...or fear...or resentment. And anger can lead to violence...and fear can lead to paranoia...and resentment can lead to despair...and despair can lead to death: not physical death...but death of the soul. Who is Paul kidding? Who is Paul kidding with his rather narrow way of parsing the human experience of suffering?

For the Apostle Paul, as for the first-generation of Christians in general, the story of God...and therefore their own stories...begin and end with the story of Christ...with the story of Christ and him crucified. The Christ who had prayed *to* God, but the Christ who—in some remarkable way—had fully embodied God! Paul speaks of suffering throughout his writings not because he is morbid, not because his own experience has been nothing but an experience of suffering (although Paul certainly knew suffering first hand) but because Paul had discovered—in his encounter with Christ—that God the Creator, and God the Spirit, can only be understood in light of the rather odd things God-in-Christ got up to on a Friday morning just before the start of one especially momentous Passover. Dying on a Cross...reposing in a cave...rising from a grave. A story in which suffering is permitted to have neither the final word...nor the last laugh. Reminding us that suffering...endured in faith...need not be regarded as a sign of our having been abandoned by God. More to the point on a Trinity Sunday...on a Trinity Sunday...reminding us that suffering, far from being foreign to God's own being, is part and parcel of what it means to be God, of what it means to name God as God. Let me repeat that: *the suffering of Christ, above all, reminds us that suffering, far from being foreign to God's own being, is part and parcel of what it means to be God, of what it means to name God as God, for what it means for us, as Christians, to worship God as God!*

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I am reminded...reminded of a thought to which my own children often give voice. Schooled, as so many young people nowadays are, on great gobs of science fiction, they will not hesitate to state: "You know, Dad, we're an experiment! We human beings are part of some large-scale experiment!" Anytime I'm tempted to offer even mild disagreement on that score, I find myself recalling the book of Job, which makes it clear that God (with a little bit of egging on from the Satan) isn't above indulging in a friendly experiment or two. And yet, when viewed from the perspective of Trinity, the important point is this.

The God we name as Source of the experiment (the One to whom Jesus prayed when he said "Abba") side by side with the God whose Spirit guides and governs the experiment (the Spirit that came to the Church at Pentecost): this God was not too proud to come *inside* the experiment: experiencing life, experiencing in Christ *human* life, not just as external Creator and observer, not even as a hovering spiritual force, but rather as bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. Which means that the experience of the human being Jesus, far from being incidental to God's ultimate identity, is now at the very heart of God, will always be at the very heart of God. You see: to say, as Christians have been saying for nearly 2000 years, that "God was in Christ making

peace with our world” is to speak of God not as a number, but as One whose love cannot be quantified because it knows no bounds, whose desire to find us has no upper limit because it bows to no obstacles, whose willingness to suffer with us—thereby transforming even our suffering into a means of grace—is beyond anything we can even begin to comprehend let alone enumerate. God-in-three persons, yes: but far far far more basically: God each of whose persons—each of whose persons!--offers unimaginable creativity, indescribably stubborn faithfulness, above all: a love that will never yield. A love that simply will not yield! Not now! Not ever!

‘In you, O God, there is a refuge
in you we find our peace.
When all we know is chaos
may our trust in your increase.

In you there is a vision
in you we learn to dream,
When all we see is desert
may you be our living stream.”¹

May it be so! In the name of the Triune God! Amen!!

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¹ From the hymn, “In You There Is A Refuge”, Words by Keri Wehlander, Music by Linnea Good.