

May 22, 2016

TEXT: John 16:4b–15

TITLE: Closing Arguments

One of the worst children’s sermons I ever heard in my life was about the Trinity. (No, it wasn’t given here at ELPC.) I have vivid memories of a pastor telling a group of children that God is so big we can never understand God all at once. He had a bag with him that contained a stuffed animal. He reached inside and said, “I feel something short, like a tail. I feel something long, like a leg. I feel something pointy, like a long nose.” Then he explained to the children that God is our Creator, Savior and the Holy Spirit and when we put those together, just like when we put together having felt something like a tail, a leg and a long nose, we begin to understand who God is. Then he pulled a purple elephant out of the bag. I’m sure all those 4 year olds went back to their pews thinking, “God is a purple elephant.”

One of the foundational doctrines of Christianity is the Trinity—God known as three persons yet of one unified substance. Too often preachers try to explain the Trinity scientifically—how God the Creator, God incarnate in Jesus Christ, and God the Holy Spirit can do three separate things at once but in effect only have to buy one admission ticket to Kennywood. My preference is that you think about the Trinity relationally – how the work of God, Christ, and Spirit flow together and continuously, even if aspects fulfill different functions. That’s how the Trinity is described in the reading we heard from John 16. Jesus said, “I am going to the One who sent me” —to God the Father, Mother, Creator of all that is. Jesus also said, “All that God has is mine”—showing the oneness between God and Christ. Then Jesus goes further and says that he is going away, but the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, is coming and this Spirit of truth will guide, encourage and comfort us, taking what Christ knows and declaring it to us. So all that God is and knows is in Christ, and all that is in Christ is declared and brought to us by the Spirit—with all three being unified and one. It is less important to understand where one part of the Trinity ends and another part begins. Rather we trust that the Three in One move through all life together to lead us into righteousness, truth and salvation. And that good news has nothing to do with purple elephants.

Jesus chose to talk about the Trinity while he was with his disciples near the end of his earthly life. He shared a final meal with them, but his heart was heavy as he looked into the eyes of those he loved and told them he was leaving them. He knew they were apprehensive and filled with sorrow. On that day, Jesus shared some final words as a closing argument to the case he’d been making the past few years, trying again to convince them that God’s love is stronger than evil, fear and even death. But he knew that the proof of this love would only be seen after the coming hours passed—hours that would include an angry mob, a sham of a trial, whipping, crucifixion and death—followed by a resurrection event they would only dimly understand. So instead of describing all of that to them, Jesus simply said, *“I have so much to tell you, but you cannot bear to hear it now.”*

We all know what that experience is like—of looking at someone but saying either out loud or to ourselves, “I have so much to tell you, but you can’t bear to hear it now.” A parent looks at a child deciding how much he or she can hear. A young adult looks up at a parent, withholding a secret because telling this news would be too much for the parent to bear. We go through our days—as families, friends, co-workers, acquaintances—holding back a part of our story—not telling how we are in pain, how we’ve known abuse or violence, how our sexual identity is a secret we’re afraid to name, how we still grieve past losses. Men and women come back from war zones unable to share what they’ve seen. People who have wept in silence—because of grief or addiction or anxiety—put on a stoic face as they turn the doorknob and go out to face the world. We know that healing comes by unburdening ourselves of these secrets, but we’re afraid that speaking the words out loud is just too much for us or for someone else to bear.

Here’s the good news: Jesus answers prayers. On that day long ago, Jesus recognized a problem. He stood before his sorrow-filled disciples knowing they were about to endure more than words could express. So Jesus provided a way forward. He promised that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, would come and help them understand at last. Do you see the wisdom of his words? Jesus’ closing argument was not some complicated lecture on theology. Jesus’ closing argument was the promise that we will not be alone. It was relational: *“All that God has is also mine and is known by the Spirit; and although I am going away, the Spirit of truth will be with you and will help you understand and bear all things. Do not let your hearts be troubled neither let them be afraid.”*

God as a Triune God exists in relationship. We come to faith in God, as Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit, through relationships—relationships with God and relationships with one another. Jesus gave his closing arguments to the disciples, whom he loved individually but to whom he spoke as a group. Later, when Pentecost happened, the Holy Spirit allowed the individual men and women disciples to speak in the languages of foreign visitors to Jerusalem, yet they all spoke the same message about Christ’s victory over the grave. Faith in God is never a solo pursuit. It is a group activity—a community experience—*e pluribus unum*: out of many, one.

Much of who I am today was shaped by riding on a school bus. Forty-five minutes every morning and afternoon, over dusty gravel roads around Paola, Kansas, in a big yellow, bad springs, minimal seat padding, old school bus. On the bus were Future Farmers of America, grease monkeys who took shop class, math nerds, jocks, cheerleaders, band members, bookworms, socialites and the last-to-be-picked in gym class. Because it was a relatively small school, many of us wore several of those hats: the grease monkey who was a math whiz; or in my case, the piano player who lived on the farm. To survive I learned how to talk across the social boundaries—to discuss 4-H projects, sports teams and science fairs. However we differed from one another, we were all on the same bus and no one was getting to the destination any faster than anyone else.

Sadly our world is moving away from that fundamental truth of being one, diverse community. Our schools and daily lives feel more segregated than ever. We can't talk with people across the aisle from us; in fact, many don't want to talk with anyone who's different—who's from another land, another political party, another state. We are afraid of the shouting matches that will mark our national elections coming up and the political conventions on the horizon. Through our computers and smartphones, we have access through the Internet to the height and breadth of all human knowledge, but we only use it to bookmark our individual preferences and see a news feed shaped by the algorithms of our personal idiosyncrasies, biases and prejudices. In 2014, drunk drivers killed 12,000 people in America, and even though we have the technology now to make it impossible to start your car if you're inebriated or use your cellphone while the car is in motion, we insist that the individual's right to drive drunk or text while driving is more important than the safety and well-being of all. No more school buses of the common good; only the American single-seat sedans of self-righteousness.

If God exists in a Trinity of relationships, what makes us think we can thrive all by ourselves? If Jesus spoke and taught to groups of disciples, promising that the Spirit of Truth would come to them together, leading them into all wisdom, what makes us think that spirituality is an individual choice that can be lived out on a private island with *à la carte* theologies? We are in this together. If that is too much to hear or bear right now, it is only because we have refused to accept God's fundamental truth of diversity and relationships.

Remember Jesus said it is a good thing that he goes away, because if he doesn't go away, we will not be open to receiving the Advocate—the Counselor—the Holy Spirit, who corrects our persistent sins, teaches us about true righteousness, and opens our eyes to see God's judgment against trying to go it alone. The same Trinitarian movement of God's creation, Jesus' glorification, and the Holy Spirit's Pentecostal power and inspiration is active in our little Trinitarian lives. We come to be by God our Creator. We are saved by Christ's grace through faith; and we go forth to love and serve God and neighbor by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Dr. King so wisely said, we, as the church, are not simply thermometers measuring the precepts of popular opinion; we are thermostats working to transform the priorities and values of society.

We cannot stand still. Neither can we stand alone. The good news is that you don't have to do either. The triune God is at work in your life for good, answering prayers, healing wounds, offering hope. And God's faithful work takes place in the big bus of this world—messy, diverse, dusty, bumpy, cantankerous, splendid, surprising, ever-new world made by God, redeemed by Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit. Those words reflect Christ's closing argument, but thanks be to God, this story, our story, is not yet finished.

AMEN