

June 16, 2019

TEXT: John 16:12–15

TITLE: Stepping into a Joyful Mystery

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

When people make an appointment to see me in my office, it is often about one particular topic. Granted, we may talk about lots of things—about families, about their health and what it's like getting older, about disappointments and dreams. But quite often we end up talking about one thing—the difference between the words we speak in church and what people actually believe about Jesus and faith. For many of you—for visitors, friends and long-time members alike—there is a disconnect between what we say on Sunday and what you believe in your individual hearts. And at some point, that disconnect becomes real enough that you call me and ask to chat about it in my office.

Before I go any further—before you get nervous and say to yourself, “He’s talking about me. He’s found me out!”—let me reassure you that questions about faith are good things. Doubts simply mean you take what you believe serious enough that you resist shallow answers about God and life. And even if what you’re doubting about is a big topic, like whether Jesus is the Son of God, I want you to relax, because that is almost always the question everyone asks who comes into my office. In a nutshell, I am happy to hear about such doubts. My hope is that you will not let these questions convince you to step away from the church, but rather that you’ll see them as invitations to step into the joyful mystery that is our Christian faith.

For thousands of years, a fundamental faith idea has been passed down from generation to generation: Human beings flourish for a time and then we die and pass away, but there is One with whom we are in relation and who is eternal—who is the source of life, the sustainer of life, and the perfecter of life. We name this being God—the One who was, who is, and who will be. (Notice that twice I’ve used groupings of three to talk about God. When dealing with big subjects, three is the best number to capture what needs to be said. That’s important for today as it’s Trinity Sunday.) People first talked about God and later they told stories about Jesus Christ. In time, those stories were written down and depicted in art and architecture. Before long the wonder of an eternal God was reduced to short creeds and catechisms, words we were expected to accept without question.

But we do have questions. Where is heaven? Is there a heaven? Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Are miracles real and if so, why do they only happen to a few people? To answer these questions, we’re often told “Here’s what it says about that in the bible” or “Here’s what the church believes about that,” followed by that awkward phrase, “It’s just something you need to accept by faith.” I don’t find that to be a helpful response, so it is not a phrase I use with people. And honestly, Jesus didn’t say it either.

When Jesus was with his disciples near the end of his life, he literally said to them, *I still have many things to tell you, but you cannot bear them now.* In effect, you can’t understand everything now. He went on to say that there is a Spirit of Truth that comes

from God, and this Spirit will guide them into what they need to know—including what they need to know about him. Wrapped up in this conversation is an early description of the Trinity: God understood in three ways: as Creator, Jesus the Savior, and the Spirit of Truth. In a fascinating way, the best way to understand the one God is complicate things by talking about God as three in one.

Here's how it works. Because creation is a wonder beyond our comprehension, we are generally OK with speaking about God as Creator—as the divine wisdom behind all that is and who holds it together with mathematical precision and incomparable beauty. Next, all of us have had moments of inspiration and moments when our conscience shows us the difference between right and wrong. We know that we are more than flesh and blood creatures—that we have an inner spirit that guides our actions, our hopes and dreams. So it isn't too hard to imagine that our human spirit is in tune with God's Spirit, especially if God is a loving and active God who cares for creation and each of us. So there's God as Creator and God as Holy Spirit.

But where is Jesus in this equation? Surprising, the one figure in the Trinity that we have the most concrete information about is the one about whom we need to learn to see through a lens of wonder and mystery. Yes, long ago people met Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, we are reasonable certain he was brought before the Roman authorities to be condemned to death and we know roughly where he was crucified outside the city walls. But any talk about who Jesus actually was pushes us to the limits of human language itself. The conservative Christian error is to emphasize Jesus as the divine Son of God, one eternal in the heavens who came down to us – which makes him feel detached from our experiences. The liberal Christian error is to focus mostly on the human Jesus, which reduces him to a smart teacher or a benevolent social worker for our troubled times. To truly think about Jesus involves stepping into a place of mystery and paradox, mulling over how he was human yet divine, an earthly form yet a resurrection identity.

That's why it is best to start with the other two parts of the Trinity and move toward Jesus, rather than the other way around. Start with God as Creator—a Creator also active in the world as the Holy Spirit—and then imagine a snapshot of that loving Creator and active Spirit embodied in the being of Jesus Christ. Connect them by thinking of God as creative power—the Spirit as transforming power—and add in Christ's story about this one who is saving, liberating power (Tillich). Long ago one of the ancient Church Fathers, Tertullian—who was prone to being a bit of a curmudgeon—connected them even more closely when he described the Trinity as a plant: with the Creator as the deep root, Jesus as the green shoot that breaks into the world, and the Spirit as that which spreads beauty, fruit and fragrance into the world.¹ Tertullian's metaphor is both mysterious yet tangible—which is just how all good theology should be.

If the plant metaphor doesn't work for you, another approach is to think about God's nature in terms of relationships. A modern theologian named Sallie McFague suggests we think of God as Mother, Christ as Lover, and the Spirit as Friend accompanying us

on life's journey.² An old theologian named Irenaeus invites us to imagine that when the Triune God turns toward the world in love, the Son and the Spirit become the two arms of God by which all humanity was made and taken into God's embrace.³

It is okay not to have precise language about Jesus Christ, or about God as a sacred Trinity. To speak about God with absolute precision is to diminish God into our human categories, to reduce God to our flimsy words and finite concepts. God is too big, too wonderful, too exuberant for such things. Besides, we already have pretty good instincts about whether something is true or not. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said "*You will know them by their fruits...A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit*" (Mt 7:16,20). Healthy, humble understandings of God bear good fruit, while narrow, divisive language about God bears bad fruit. And what's true of individuals is also true of nations. Walter Rauschenbusch wrote 100 years ago that an unchristian social order makes good people do bad things, while a Christian social order finds ways for bad people to do good things. Faith really is pretty straightforward—do good, don't do evil; believe in the God who made us, in the Christ who modeled how to live without fear of death, and in the Holy Spirit who continues to lead us in a joyful dance of freedom, peace and purposeful living.

In effect, that's precisely what Jesus said long ago in that room with his disciples. He said, "*I have many things yet to tell you, but you won't understand them now. But the Holy Spirit—in Greek the word he used is *paraklete*, which means the one called to walk alongside us—the Holy Spirit will guide you into all truth, declaring what is good for you to know about me and our Parent God.*"

So if you want to come to my office and talk more about all this, I am more than happy to do so. I probably will not have a precise answer for your questions. I too struggle with reducing the story of Jesus Christ to human concepts, especially when his story involves miracles and an Easter morning resurrection. But none of that is a reason to step away from church. Rather it is a call to step deeper into the church—to challenge this congregation and all congregations should they ever become rigid and judgmental, and to celebrate with this congregation and all congregations whenever they splash waters of baptism that mark new life; whenever they share tiny meals of bread and juice that wondrously feed us; when we re-tell stories of angel annunciations, stable births, Easter empty tombs, and Pentecost flames of spiritual power. None of it makes our faith easier to digest, but all of it involves a mystery that is truer than anything else we will encounter during our brief span here on earth. As good ol' Irenaeus said long ago, we should let the arms of our Creator, the Savior and the Holy Spirit, embrace us in love. Step into this mystery—it is a loving mystery—and it is precisely where God—Creator, Christ, Spirit—wants us to be.

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, 1998, pp. 162, 291.

² Trinity images from article by Elizabeth Johnson, *Theology Today*, October 1997.

³ Miraslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 128.