

Dreams

I have a confession to make this morning as we celebrate Trinity Sunday. In all the years I've served in ministry, I've had precious little opportunity to discuss the doctrine of the Trinity.

Even when welcoming families wanting their infants or toddlers into full membership in the church as candidates for baptism; even when welcoming newcomers into full membership in the United Church of Canada, discussing the doctrine of the Trinity has not been top of mind.

Except of course, for me, in my role as the leader wanting to ensure that the promises we make in the covenant of baptism have some meaning.

Even then, getting folks to think deeply about what they are doing and how the words they choose to describe their understanding of God using trinitarian language is often a struggle.

For example, when I ask folks to choose whether or not they would like me

'to baptize them in the name of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.'

Or 'in the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.' or even

'in the name of Love, Love Incarnate, and Love's Power.'

In most cases, I've learned that folks prefer the traditional baptismal formula using the words 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.'

Sadly, more often than not, I am met with blank stares as if I have asked them a question they just can't answer.

For me, even though our shared experience of the holiness so often palpably present in the sacrament of baptism or profession of faith is profoundly and deeply meaningful, I do lament the lost opportunity to discuss how such word choices help us clarify what we believe of God, Jesus, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the trinity isn't a concept found anywhere in the bible.

Rather, it was first formulated at the first ecumenical council of Christian bishops at Nicea some 300 years after Jesus walked the earth.

Gathered together by the Roman Emperor Constantine, the task before them was to develop a statement of faith clarifying and unifying the basic tenets of Christianity.

Arising out of that council, the Nicene and Apostles' Creed, both of which can be found at the back of our hymnbooks, were formed and continue to

be important for many Protestants even to this day.

However, we, United Church folk, ever sensitive to the subtleties of language and it informs meaning and belief have continued to grapple with words to describe our understanding God in relationship with Jesus, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit and how all of that informs our faith.

No doubt some of you here have engaged in faith formation studies at some point or another as our understanding of what it means to call ourselves Christian in the context of the United Church of Canada since it was first founded by an act of parliament in 1925. We have but to think of the New Creed and The Song of Faith as more recent examples of that grappling.

Still, for all our efforts to use inclusive language to describe what we believe and how we understand the relationship between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, most United Church folk are not keen to explore doctrine.

Instead, most United Church of Canada congregations lean more towards focusing their energies on stewarding properties and human resources.

In a rapidly changing world and in an aging demographic that's not really surprising.

To quote St Francis of Assisi, it would be reasonable to say that we, in the United Church of Canada prefer to preach the gospel through our actions and our programs, and sometimes, if necessary, we do diligence to our statements of faith and our mission and vision statements by using words.

Whether this is prudent or not, it is what it is and we are who we are.

This morning, as we sing and pray and open ourselves to our relationships with God and with each other on Trinity Sunday, it is good to acknowledge and celebrate our awareness that God is so much more than our words or thoughts can describe, tame, or wrestle to the ground.

For God is Wholly Mystery, Holy Love!

The synergistic relationship between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, this divine dance, came to my mind for me again this morning in re-visiting [our gospel text](#) according to the author of John Marilyn read aloud for us just a few minutes ago.

Here, in the second chapter of John, following close on the heels of the wedding at Cana and coming before the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well, we meet Nicodemus, learned religious leader seeking out Jesus for one of those late night chats.

While it is hard to know if their conversation exceeded Nicodemus' expectations, we do know this: it was a profound and meaningful, we might even say it was a transformational conversation.

Though this is one of my favourite texts from scripture, I do find myself wondering a few things about the story.

For example, I wonder: How late into the night do you think they might have talked?

I also wonder how it was for Jesus to be so graciously and respectfully acknowledged by one of the religious elite.

Was he surprised at this turn of events?

Did it give him hope for what was yet to come?

I also found myself how this particular text might lend itself to celebrating the Trinity.

After some grappling with that notion, I decided to follow the wise counsel from biblical scholars advising not to try too hard to make those connections.

That said, from Nicodemus opening words: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God" to Jesus' closing words that "God so loved the world that he gave us his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life", a lot of theological ground was covered!

On top of that, for me, the entire ebb and flow of their conversation felt infused with the holy.

And then of course, what happened to Nicodemus after their conversation seems just as important to me as any discussion of its theological content.

For you see, even though Nicodemus' actions continued to be dictated by his status as one of the religious elite, his behavior began to change, little by little.

As tensions rise and as Jesus is ultimately brought to trial we discover Nicodemus making one small but

courageous bid to speak in defense of Jesus (John, Chapter 7, verse 51).

Still later, John's gospel reminds us that it was Nicodemus who accompanies Joseph of Arimathea to the cross at Golgotha armed with spices brought to prepare Jesus' body for its proper burial (see John 19, verses 38-39).

Though some might say this more obvious act of courage was too little too late, still, the power and the pathos of the moment is not lost on us.

These two acts of courage underscore for me that we can never underestimate how deep and meaningful conversation can change lives and how that can have impact over the course of our lives.

You know the conversations I mean?

The deep and meaningful conversations that leave us feeling unsettled or confused?

The ones needing to be mulled over again and again?

The ones that stay with us long after the words exchanged have happened and that beg us to think and think again?

You know the ones I mean?

The ones that help us learn to be less afraid to risk stepping outside of the constraints that hold us hostage to the status quo and the way things have always been done.

All this brings me back to how our faith and our actions intersect and from there how what we believe informs our

actions and sometimes, how a small action, such as seeking out conversation with Jesus can lead to transformed lives and transformed living one tiny courageous step at a time.

As many of you know, the board here at Trinity will be meeting after worship this morning.

Among other things, will be taking a closer look at the two goals it has set for itself for the coming year which include spiritual renewal and intergenerational balance.

Thinking back on Jesus' holy conversation with Nicodemus this morning, that we could be providing opportunities for folk to think more deeply about that particular gem of a biblical story and relationship.

For example, what would it look like for us to be more deliberate and intentional about our own relationships with Jesus?

What would it look like for us to be more deliberate and intentional about our conversations with each other and when they take on depth and meaning that we could aptly describe as holy?

What if indeed!?!

This morning, as we celebrate our ongoing need to grapple with the doctrine of the Trinity dating back to its inception some 300 years after Jesus walked the earth, my fond prayer is that we might risk daring to re-visit the topic anew.

In the name of our Creator, God, our Redeemer, Jesus, the Christ, and our Sustainer, the Holy Spirit, amen.

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