

Trinity Sunday 2019

Far and away the most challenging course of study in my seminary experience was CPE, clinical pastoral education. I loved the academics. I thrived in academics. It was like being in college again... except that I cared.... All of this knowledge just there for the taking. I would have stayed forever if they'd let me; but they made me graduate and get a job. But CPE was quite a different story... twelve weeks of pastoral work in a hospital. I was assigned to the neuro-intensive care ward on the fifth floor of St. David's hospital in Austin. Unlike my friend Brad, who was assigned to the rehab floor and spent his days praying for hips and knees and shoulders, my assignment was hard core.... In my pastoral charge were victims of strokes and brain tumors and head trauma. Every day there was the issue of whether or not to cease mechanical life support for patients who had no chance of recovery. I met with families every day traumatized by the experience that comes with the end of life of a loved one.

I had already been in seminary for two years when the time came for CPE. I felt pretty sure I had a handle on the theological matters requisite for counselling people who were facing the reality of death. I was of course dead wrong. For the first two weeks in the clinic I would meet with families who were shocked, desperate, disoriented, grieving. They were asking the serious questions of life...

why illness.... Why my Dad, he's so young?... what will my mother do?... Was it something I did to bring this on?.... Why me? I had no answers to those questions. I would meet with families and I would hear the things I was saying.... And what I said sounded stiff... even stupid. I had nothing to say in the face of life on its most extreme terms. For the first two weeks I witnessed my theological world crumble around me. All this glorious knowledge, Biblical History and interpretation, theology, liturgy, Greek... It all seemed so very inconsequential and hollow.

After these horrific two weeks I met with my supervisor, Will Spong, an Episcopal priest, and brother of the famous bishop Jack Spong. He wore sandals, had longish hair, a little unkempt... he played the piano by ear. He only had one good eye having lost the other in a baseball accident when he was a teenager. I shared my frustration with him... I told him that I might not be cut out to be a priest... that in the face of illness and death, not the ideas of illness and death, but the grim reality of them... I had nothing to offer. Will listened to me politely, gently... and after a few moments of thought, he looked at me with his good eye, and said... "You don't get it do you?" This has nothing to do with what you know or what you know to say... This has everything to do with presence.... Presence.... Being vulnerable enough to walk with people in their world... sometimes words

are helpful, he said... but often times there is no need for words... only presence.... Sacred presence.

Today is the feast day of the Holy Trinity that great monolith of our Christian theology... that God is three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's the only day in the liturgical year that celebrates a theology. But after all, it is the central tenet of our faith that has endured over the history of the church. The doctrine was hammered out by the church fathers in the early fourth century at the behest of the Emperor Constantine who had decreed that Christianity was the official religion of the empire. He wanted a definitive belief system to which the faithful would ascribe and assent. It was a prescription for order and uniformity. That's what empires do. We say we are a monotheistic faith, and yet, we say that God is three persons. Our Nicene Creed is structured in deference to the Trinity.... The first part of the creed has to do with the Father, then the second part the Son, and the third section, the Holy Spirit. We invoke the Trinity in our Eucharistic prayers; we baptize in the name of the Trinity; we cross ourselves when we say it.... but alas the Trinity, like all theology are only speculative words, words that can grow tired and hollow from overuse.... Words that often fail us when we come face to face with the rigors of life... and death.

I want to suggest this morning that Trinity is all about presence... and not presence only... but process. Trinity is much more about doing than it is about believing.... God is creator... making and remaking with improvisational skill the world into a gracious and just and beautiful order... and God the Son is the one who stands against evil, modelling what Love looks like, and reconciling the people of the world to Godself... welcoming the stranger and the outcast.... Giving his life for the poor and the disenfranchised; restoring humanity to wholeness from the structures of sin in our world... and God the Spirit is the presence of God that animates our very bodies and souls, motivating us with courage and fortitude to live into the mystery that is creation. It is the Spirit that moves us out of our comfortable self-sufficiency and compels us to risk our lives for Love.

The Trinity is not a two dimensional tableau ensconced upon stain glass windows insisting that God is utterly other from us, and safe... A thing to be admired. Idolized and worshipped from a safe distance... the Trinity is an acclamation that God is among us... that God is intimately proximate to the world God loves.... Present in the ecstasy of life, and present in its unbearableness... and we brothers and sisters are called into the Trinity as participants... That is incarnation... We are called to intimate proximity to the creative and restoring process that is creation... we are called in vulnerable empathy to be present to

the suffering of the world... The Trinity when all is said and done is about change and transformation... the creative process is always about change and transformation; the redeeming and restoring process is about change and transformation; our life's work, what gives us breath, is our ability to change things for the better... I don't know how God got the reputation for being unchanging... God is all about change... The threefold reality of God will not leave things alone... because Love will not leave things alone... Love only knows to create, to redeem, to inspire, and to make beautiful this world and all who live in it.

So when we invoke the name of the Holy Trinity... you might cross yourself, because the Trinity is as much about you as it is about God... It is an acclamation that presence is the thing... because when we are present, vulnerable to the lives of our neighbor, then the transforming power of love is there... creating, redeeming, and making good and noble the world... Be present good people to the world God loves, the world despite its painful rigor, the world God calls good... be present, because when our well-constructed theology crumbles, as it surely will, that is all there is... Presence: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.