

Trinity Sunday (Year A): June 15, 2014
Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8; II Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Today is Trinity Sunday – not a time to restate a complicated doctrine, but rather, to celebrate our experience of the Living God who creates, redeems and sanctifies all of life. God is the One who is paradoxically beyond us, among us, and also within us—yet all the while the One and same power of life and love. This God we experience as *unknowable*, the incomprehensible mystery beyond our knowledge. Yet we also experience this same God as *well known* through the life, death and resurrected life of Jesus. And we experience the same God as *infinitely knowable* as the Spirit of God who is as close to us as our very God-given breath. And so, we have a Trinity—One God who is experienced as One in Three, Three in One.

Today, we encounter this Trinity—this divine paradoxical mystery—in what’s often called the Great Commission, when the Risen Jesus gives his final instructions as he sends forth his disciples saying, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” (Matthew 28:19). Today’s gospel, then, is also about evangelism which, along with the word “Trinity,” continues to be one of the most misused and misunderstood terms in our church’s vocabulary. We know evangelism means different things to different people depending on their interpretation of what it is to share the gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ.

That’s not all bad, because we each can do evangelism in different ways. For some, this means the strict dictionary definition of “the winning or revival of personal commitments to Christ.” For others, it means church growth. For still others, it means making the church community more inclusive and more representative of the wider community. For yet others, it means being the hands and feet of Jesus in the world, working for healing, justice, and peace, in co-mission—joining Christ’s mission to build the bonds of our common *humanity* more than imposing a *Christianity*. For a lot of us, it’s a combination of these.

I’m sure there were diverse interpretations of the mission on which they were being sent, among these disciples of Jesus. And, I am sure, not each of them handled their assignment in quite the same way. I also suspect that some of the disciples weren’t just doubtful, but also were anxious, standing before Jesus and being commissioned to such a vast undertaking. They were not being sent out to make a few social calls to people who would welcome them and wine and dine them, or afford them some “red carpet” treatment. Rather, they were being sent out, as Jesus stated earlier [Matthew 10:16; cf. Luke 10:3], as “lambs in the midst of wolves.”ⁱ

Also, there is no evidence that Jesus spent much time teaching his disciples *how* to evangelize, or how to preach, teach or baptize. What Jesus did teach them was how to pray (“Our Father, who art in heaven...”), and how to pack lightly. Therefore, the way they were to proceed was not with a great tool box of techniques or dogma, nor with stacks of seminary notes, nor with an overload of personal baggage. Rather, they were called

simply to be sent out, to show up and then to improvise. They were to recognize the divine in themselves and in others, to recognize their companionship with Jesus even when he was not there with them physically, and to recognize their complete reliance on God and their need to connect with others in right relationship.

Looking at this Biblical evidence, I can say that it consoles me—and maybe some of you as fellow disciples—because I, we, are always a little unqualified, never quite prepared. *And* we are reminded both that it is Jesus’ ministry and not just our own to which we are called through the Holy Spirit, *and* that he would be with us. I’m also reminded of the blockages and stumbling blocks that I carry with me which may prevent others’ receiving my message. One such obstacle to communicating the Good News can be our use of less-than-sensitive communication – communication that may clutter or counter the very love of God in Christ we’re trying to share.

Our Christian story is a compelling one, but as Sam Portaro points out, it is a family story.ⁱⁱ Portaro states that our greatest failing and our greatest positive challenge, may be to turn our story from a *monologue* with the wider world to a genuine *dialogue*, first, amongst different branches within, and then, with those beyond the Christian family. When Christians take the opportunity to share with those who do not espouse their faith and spiritual worldview, we tend to launch defensively – and at times offensively – into our story.ⁱⁱⁱ Also, we who have heard the story many times have not always listened attentively; and we sometimes garble and distort our story when we pass it along.

A vast and growing number of people do not know our story, and neither do we know theirs. A challenge for all of us is to learn our story well and become more secure in our own faith journey and tradition and its broad embrace. In that process we can learn new ways of telling our story—centered in the Love of God in Christ and our common humanity—not with the intent to change, “complete” or convert their story into ours, but with an honest and deep appreciation for the truth of their experience, thus honoring their family, as it were. Our shared challenge—ours and theirs—is to listen and understand. And when we find some common ground, we may then discover we are on holy ground. As James Carroll put it, it’s incumbent upon us to communicate that the Jesus of the gospels “is not the source of conflict, but the source of conflict resolution...[and that] God the friend to one people can be friend to all.”^{iv} Or as former Presiding Bishop, Frank Griswold put it, we as Christ’s followers are “ministers of reconciliation in a church and a world in which faithfulness and truth wear many faces.”^v So then, when we set about “sharing the Good News” and “building community” and “working for inclusivity,” we need to be careful not to act as though ours is the only family and the only story, and that our mission is to make everyone like us. We affirm a Creed that states that we all originate from one God—a God who creates all, redeems all and sustains all. And if our words of invitation address those not on a Jesus-centered path; as we try to live out Jesus’ Great Commission and point to Jesus as the way, rather than putting him *in the way*—it’s not those on a Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, Jewish, Taoist, or even a humanist or non-theistic path to whom we need to direct these efforts today.^{vi} Rather, it’s those who seem not to have found any way home to the heart of God and to their own hearts that such invitation is directed.^{vii}

As Christians, we are summoned and given authority as were the disciples in today's gospel, to share the Good News by word and deed. I suspect that such good news is often more effectively communicated by our concerned and attentive listening than by any rush of impassioned preaching or witnessing or baptizing. If evangelism really means sharing the good news, what is more evangelical than the good news that someone cares enough for another simply to listen to him or her? As the Letter of James says, "let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak...[1:19]." Or as St. Francis said, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words." It's amazing how the Holy Spirit can work through and despite our stammering tongues and anxious manner to reach people with the good news of God's love in Christ. And as one of my mentors, retired Massachusetts Bishop Barbara Harris often stated, "The power behind you is greater than the task ahead of you."^{viii} Or, as Jesus promised, "remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age [Matthew 28:20]."

ⁱ Jesus had made it very clear that not everyone would have the welcome mat out for them. He told them that in some places they would be rejected. But that was all right too, because he gave them specific instructions on how to handle both acceptance and rejection [Matthew 10:5-15; Mark 6:6-13; Luke 10:1-20].

According to the gospels, there is no evidence that the disciples were chosen and sent out by Jesus because they were more articulate or smart or morally upright than other people. In fact the gospels suggest over and over that, as Frederick Buechner put it, "they were continually missing the point, jockeying for position, and when the chips were down, interested in nothing so much as saving their own skins. Their sole qualification seems to have been their initial willingness to rise to their feet when Jesus said, 'Follow me.'" (Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 62)

ⁱⁱ Sam Portaro, Brightest and Best (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2001), pp. 100-101.

ⁱⁱⁱ Also, we tend to use esoteric or insider vocabulary, and a lot of other clutter that has been developed within the family for talking about these things, which can have the effect of excluding others and giving them the unintended perception that we are arrogant, and feel superior to them.

^{iv} James Carroll, "The meaning of monotheism" (Boston Globe, March 16, 1999).

^v Quoted in Episcopal News Service, April 19, 2005.

^{vi} As much as Jesus is our center, our way leading us home to the heart of God, so then every major religion is a path, a way heading to home in the heart of God. In God's house, as it were, there is a spaciousness of spirit; there are many dwelling places and many paths that can build the bonds of our common humanity as children of God. If we really believe this, then we are already surrounded by community. And we do not have to work for inclusivity; for God already includes us all in one family – "the world house" as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it.^{vi} We simply need to uncover and rediscover that reality, recognizing in the beauty and the challenges of diversity the intrinsic unity that underlies it.

^{vii} As my professor and spiritual guide, Roland Walls, put it:

"...it's about the real human condition. Because God addresses us as we are...not in any kind of specially Christian way. He addresses me as a *human being*. The very humanity that his Son took on for me...It's about *humanity*, not about Christianity. There's no word 'Christian' in the whole of that Nicene Creed. God was incarnate, he was made flesh of the Virgin, and he became [hu]man, not Christian. He became [*hu*]man. And if we spell that out at all the levels, we get into a kind of perspective that enables us to see the whole thing, not as a religion, but as a *new humanity*. It's about the restoration of [hu]man[ity], not getting more Christians...From Charles de Foucauld...he

said this: 'It is more important to be human than to be religious.'...it is this that really brought alive the little phrase in the Nicene Creed, 'And was made man.'...that is an extraordinary statement, because it's non-religious. [Yet] It's a faith statement...He became man. And everything else that follows comes from that little root starting point...It also interprets everything that follows, including the 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.' It's subsumed under that great statement in the middle of the creed ['and was made man']...that's what's been redeemed, not some blooming religious light that's been raised up. You don't need to die on a cross to get some more religion going!"

(Quoted in Ron Ferguson with Mark Chater, Mole Under the Fence: Conversations with Roland Walls (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2006), pp. 78-79, 81, 135).

^{viii} The Rt. Rev. Barbara Harris, sermons preached at the Diocesan Conventions of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, November 3, 1997 and November 1, 2002. When we see the evidence of an almighty, loving, merciful God moving in and through us, the awkward moments and the anxious feelings can turn to a calm and joy. Finally, a word about "success." This great commission is a challenge to us to move out into the wide world. We know that what we do may not always have immediate or even eventual success. But we know, as well, that God does not require us to be successful; God requires only that we be faithful. As his disciples, Jesus wants each and all of us to bear and proclaim the gospel, not necessarily in displays of obvious effect or power, but rather in our own persons and upon the strength of our own character. That we could together and with others build affordable housing, improve our schools, help people help themselves as they seek satisfying work, or simply help mend broken hearts, or start a friendship in church or on the street, or at a shelter—it can be satisfying, even exciting when we return and tell what the Lord is doing beyond us, around us and through us. And our great reward will be in Christ's promise that our names are "written in heaven" [Luke 10:20]—not because of our success, rather because of our faithfulness—but even more so, because of God's grace and mercy.