

Trinity, Year B

Lections: Isaiah 6:1-8; Ps. 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

Over dinner a week ago, a political science professor from Chicago helped me reclaim a definition of myself. He and I were born and raised in the same large city. While our experiences of hometown were different we have formed a new relationship based on our birthplace. In fact he sent me a YouTube video this week which pulled out even more defining moments and memories. We are watching the news of hockey now – we are from Pittsburgh.

Definitions are important for the church too. At our garage sale on Saturday while talking to some of those shopping, I wanted folks to have an idea or two about our parish character. Those who brought dogs were told of our blessing of the animals and one of the children piped up, “I brought a moth!” Some of the visitors spoke about the sign for the U2charist. A couple who help those in Lowertown took shoes and other things to share then looked over our narthex bulletin boards and our cupboards and sensed that mission is part of our parish definition.

Both the diocese and the national church are engaged in processes of identity too. In the diocese it is called “branding” and is led by our new director of communications. Nationally it is called Vision 2019. In preparation for General Synod in 2010 all parishes are asked to speak about hopes and dreams for the church in a variety of forms.

Defining God is a little more complicated on this Trinity Sunday. In Isaiah the prophet has a threefold response to God: awe, humility and service. In this text God is the One who summons, prepares and sends people. We won’t find this definition in today’s creed. Many find comfort in the creed in worship; it has been an important anchor for how God is known or defined. Yet in research this week on the site text this week I read articles written by both Muslim and Jewish scholars which tell me about the challenges which our creed presents for interfaith dialogue. Sometimes the creed does feel more fixed and static for me as I acknowledge a God who is beyond even our best attempts to define; I also want mystery and unknowing to be a part of my faith, perhaps always some new discoveries.

Nicodemus, a religious leader who has been taught to think about God in specific ways, comes to Jesus with his night-time questions. Jesus attempts to move him into allowing new insights. “He is trying to help Nicodemus resonate and respond to a creator of the universe whose desire is for new birth,” new notes for his study book of God. Jesus seems to be saying that God is more like a complex chord of music that has different sounds as it moves along. Perhaps some riffs on a theme rather than the one note Nicodemus had been taught. He is resistant to this new way of thinking. But the relationship of intimacy, love and community that Jesus has come to know in God and in and through others will be offered to all as not a definition of “distance from” but now as “experienced with.”

Ron Rohlheiser, a well known spiritual writer, offers this encounter as an example of a paradigm shift. “A woman spoke of her three hour practice of centering prayer each day. This is a place where she would experience God. He asked her, “how would you compare the feelings when you meditate privately in this way to the feelings you have when at the dinner table with family and friends?” :Oh, there is no comparison, not in terms of religious experience,’ she said. At table I have nice secular experiences but in prayer I really meet God.’ Rohlheiser, like Jesus, seems dismayed. For Jesus, God is a flow of loving relationships, a Trinity, a family of life that we can enter, taste, breathe within, and let flow through and beyond us. Perhaps a dinner table, its hospitality and praying with others at worship is more important for our spiritual growth than a dogma, a creed, a classroom, or a private spiritual practice. “Since God is in community,” he says referring to the Trinity, “maybe we should be too.”

I want to add one word to the end of the creed – “and....”

I bought another book this week despite the critiques of my colleagues in ministry. Called The Shack it is a bestseller about a suffering man and his encounter with a loving God. I want to know what all the fuss is about and I haven’t read it yet. The Trinity is revealed in the following way: God the Creator is a black woman, God the Son is a laid back carpenter dude, and God the Spirit is a slight and sparkly Asian woman according to the press releases. What do you make of all that? Let me get back to you.

Amen.

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