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The First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday
June 16, 2019

Lectionary Year C:
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
Romans 5:1-5
John 16:12-15
Psalm 8

Justified by the Triune God

I love our church building for many reasons. It's beautiful, for one thing. I also love how it has been designed to support church music, with great acoustics. And I love it for the generations of prayers that have been said in it: thousands of people over the course of almost ninety years have prayed to God and come to know Christ inside that place. You can imagine the walls suffused with their prayers.

It is also a joy, however, to come outside of that wonderful place and to worship God and come to know Christ outside. The first disciples spent some of their time getting to know Christ outside. Perhaps we can imagine them on the Sulgrave lot, gathered around their Lord, hearing the Good News from his own lips. They spent time in the Temple with him and each other, and they spent time in people's houses, but they also—in those days before air conditioning—must have been outdoors with him for many hours.

With all the time that has passed, and the developments that have happened among Christ's people between that day and this one, we can sometimes forget that the shape of our collective faith today is almost wholly determined by the experiences of those early apostles with the person Jesus Christ. Everything else has flowed from that: that they lived with him, walked around outside with him, listened to him, talked to him, saw him killed, saw him be raised, watched him ascend to heaven. We call this report from them the "apostolic witness." What they saw, they passed on, and it became the foundation for everything that followed. Even today, we are the church of the apostles.

The development of the Church after those days has been an ongoing attempt to be true to those apostles and their experiences. Their experience was that, in Christ, God reconciled the world to himself. In Christ, God set things right in the world, and in our lives.

We use a lot of different words for that. Reconciliation is one: any opposition between us and God was overcome in God's love. Sometimes we use the term rectification: God put things right in Christ. Or justification: God made us justified in Christ.

Though these are all theological words, they point to a real human experience. I've used the example of Rocky Balboa before. In the first Rocky movie, Sylvester Stallone tells Adrian that he wants to go the distance with Apollo Creed in their upcoming boxing match. Why? He tells her that he wants to prove to himself, and to others, that he isn't "just another bum from the neighborhood." Right now he feels like he's nobody of consequence, that he doesn't matter. If he can go the distance with Apollo Creed, he'll know that he isn't just another bum.

Well, he does go the distance with Apollo Creed, and that's a good thing. He survives the fight and gets the girl. But the human experience is that if you depend on getting into the ring with the champion in order not to feel like a bum, the feeling fades over the course of time, and you have

to go do it, or something like it, again. And he did do it again, in several more Rocky movies, and they weren't any good, because the central premise had been disproven: it turned out that just going the distance wasn't going to make him not feel like a bum. That was going to take something else.

It was the experience of the apostles that in Christ they weren't bums anymore. That, in Christ, God had set things right for them. They hadn't earned it; they hadn't gone the distance or anything. God had just given it to them, and their restless hearts could now be at peace. It was the experience of the apostles that, in some inchoate way, Christ gave peace to their restless hearts.

This was life-changing news, and they wanted to share it. But, in order for them to share it coherently, they had to be able to share the faith as a whole. To the descendants of Abraham, they had to be able to explain how this new experience of the world being set right, was consistent with the Jewish revelation, even as it represented a new stage in it. To the Greeks and the Romans, they had to be able to explain how the picture as a whole hung together, how it all made sense. To everyone, they had to share who the God is who loves them.

Christ couldn't just be a bigger version of Apollo Creed. He couldn't just be one more of the Hebrew prophets, one among many. But he also couldn't be only a lesser version of the God of Israel either, so there was a big god and a little god. He couldn't be one of the pagan deities—they could be temperamental and competitive with people, and that wasn't their experience. He couldn't just be any of these things because, if he was, then he wouldn't have been able to reconcile God and all the people of the world. Unless Christ was God incarnate, they couldn't have had that experience of being justified, rectified; they couldn't have had that experience of their restless hearts being brought to peace.

More miraculously still, it was still happening. New people were meeting Christ, even after his ascension. Somehow, Christ was still present with them, just as he had promised. It turned out that you didn't have to be one of the first disciples, one of the people who walked around outside with Jesus before AD 33, in order to experience that. Somehow, God's peace was still here.

The early Church had to figure out some way of talking about this, and what they came up with was language about the Trinity, about the triune nature of God, that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is the first thing that we say in our service, our opening acclamation: "Blessed be God," colon, who is "Father, Son and Holy Spirit." It's the explanatory colon: the thing that follows is the description of what comes before. It would be like, if things were different, we might say, "Blessed be Ray: A Christian, a father, a server." Instead we say "Blessed be God," who is "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

The early Church didn't start by coming up with language about the Trinity and then try to fit God into it. (God doesn't fit into things.) Instead, the apostles had these experiences of encountering Christ, and they tried to figure out what those experiences implied about the nature of God. And so, as best they could, over several centuries and with no small amount of disagreement, they eventually settled on what we call the doctrine of the Trinity. God himself, who created heaven and earth, became incarnate in Christ, and continues to be fully present in the Spirit.

We don't claim to understand God: God is not a thing to be understood, the way that you might try to figure out mechanical engineering or try to understand an abstract painting. God is a mystery whom we worship, who transcends language itself. But through his grace he has shared this triune nature with us, so that we can come to know him better, and can be assured that in Christ we have been reconciled with the one who created the world and is present even now in it.

Because of God's triune nature, he was present at creation, he was present with Israel, he was incarnate in Christ, he is present in the Holy Spirit even now, inside our beautiful church, and outside, too. Blessed be our God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.