

“Remember when...”

Romans 5

May 30, 2010

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We're gathered for worship today on Memorial Day weekend, a secular holiday, established to remember the sacrifices of others. Memorial Day was first observed 142 years ago on this very day, May 30, in the year 1868, when flowers were placed on the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. The day has morphed into a weekend that announces the unofficial beginning of summer complete with Brat Fests, BBQ's, parades, and public and private gatherings of remembering. It also happens to be Trinity Sunday; two events that seemingly have little to do with one another. One, I'm sure, is much more on our minds than the other but that would probably be the case no matter when Trinity Sunday fell! Trinity Sunday is not a holiday but a holy day, the only holy day in the church year that is based on a doctrine rather than an event. The major holy days, Christmas and Easter, we all know something about: some of the minor ones, Epiphany, Baptism of the Lord, and All Saints' Day, may be familiar to us, but Trinity Sunday is easy to overlook because it's harder to understand a doctrine than it is to celebrate an event.

A recent movie came to mind when I was preparing this sermon. At first, it may seem kind of odd, but stay with me. How many of you have seen The Bucket List with Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman? In this movie, two men who are terminally ill create a “list” of things they want to “do” before they “kick the bucket.” That is die. This “bucket list” is full of “events” that together they do and check off. Doing those “events” is relatively easy; however, the tension comes when it is no longer just an event to do, but a challenge to change, to believe in something...like forgiveness and reconciliation. I won't spoil the movie for you but this movie reminded me of another story. I've told it before on Trinity Sunday, but it is worth telling again.

This other story is about St. Augustine of Hippo, a great philosopher and theologian of the 4th and 5th centuries. Augustine wanted so much to understand the doctrine of the Trinity and to be able to explain it logically. One day Augustine was walking along the seashore and reflecting on the Trinity, when he suddenly saw a little child all alone on the shore. The child made a hole in the sand, ran to the sea with a little bucket, filled her bucket, came and poured it into the hole she had made in the sand. Back and forth she went to the sea, filled her bucket and came and poured it into the hole. Augustine went up to her and said, "Little child, what are doing?" and she replied, "I am trying to empty the sea into this hole." "How do you think," Augustine asked her, "that you can empty this immense sea into this tiny hole and with this tiny bucket?" To which she replied, "And you, how do you suppose that with this your small head you can comprehend the immensity of God?" With that the child disappeared...so the story goes.

We tend to fill our “buckets” about God, with events that are easily had. Going to the ocean of experiences, in the church, service to others, mission work, and “doing things” to be good neighbors; and emptying those into the holes, the vacuums, in our lives, hoping that they will be filled, praying that we can check one more thing off our bucket list. But as Augustine wisely came to realize our hearts cannot be at peace until they rest in God. The emptiness and longing in human life is beyond those experiences, just as the immensity of God is beyond events, and so

the doctrine of the Trinity challenges us to go beyond our own bucket lists of experiences and accomplishments, and to check into, the one thing that will never get checked off; that is looking at, and living in, the mystery of God. Frederick Buechner, a twentieth century author and theologian grappling with the ideas and meaning of the Trinity just as Augustine had done fifteen centuries earlier said, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery. In a way, the Trinity is saying something about us, and the way we experience God.”

Before we look at our own particulars of that statement, “the Trinity is saying something about us and the way we experience God,” let’s take a minute to look at the Trinity in the historical context of the church. For centuries, the church has been trying to understand and explain the many ways humankind experiences God. The word, Trinity, does not appear in the Bible. Jesus doesn’t use it. Paul doesn’t use it. Of course, there are examples of the three manifestations of God, most notably in Jesus’ great commission in Matthew. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” [Matthew 28:20] Paul has the Trinitarian idea reflected in his letter blessings which we combine in our common Christian benediction; “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

The early church leaders talked about the Trinity using the Greek word, “perichoresis” (perichor-ee-sis), literally meaning, "Dancing around" or "dancing in a circle," to describe the co-unity of the Trinity as an eternal dance of the Father, Son and Spirit sharing mutual love, honor, joy and respect.¹ The choir’s anthem today, “The Dance of the Trinity” highlighted this. However, the formalization of the doctrine of the Trinity did not come until the events of the Council of Nicaea in 325. The best known result of that, of course, is the Nicene Creed which we will say together later. But it wasn’t until five centuries after that, in 828, that Trinity Sunday became an official holy day.

That’s the history lesson, now let’s look at the particulars of the statement, “the Trinity is saying something about us and the way we experience God.” The traditional personification Triune formula, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” has also been expressed as each person in the Godhead is experienced through the work they do, for example, “Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.” This is inadequate, however, as we know from the prologue of John, “in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.” Jesus, the word was with God in the beginning. In our text from Proverbs today we heard a similar thing about Lady Wisdom; many believe a reference to the Spirit, in Greek, Sophia, who also was in the beginning with God at creation.

The work of each member of the Trinity is shared by the Presence of all members of the Trinity. The inter-relationships between each One of the Godhead, is an essential aspect of the profound mystery of the Trinity. Paul Young in his book *The Shack* emphasized this. Papa, Young’s African female representation of God says to Mack, the one struggling to be in relationship with God, “To begin with, that you can’t grasp the wonder of my nature is rather a good thing... who wants to worship a God who can be fully comprehended, eh, not much mystery in that. I am one God and I am in three persons, and each of the three is fully and entirely one... love and relationship is possible for you because it already exists in me.”² “What was it the little girl said to

St. Augustine on the beach, “how do you suppose that with this your small head you can comprehend the immensity of God?”

Yes, it’s true, we cannot comprehend the immensity of God: individually or as the whole human race, throughout all of time. A 1990 article in the U.S. Catholic Monthly Magazine illustrated our lack of ability to comprehend the Trinity by saying, “God is more than two men and a bird. We experience God in three ways: as something beyond; something among us; and something within us.”³ We are to marvel at the mystery of God that is beyond us, knowing full well that we will never comprehend God. We experience God among us and within us, through our relationships with God, the world and others. So throughout our lifetimes, we seek to fill our “bucket” of experiences with not only events but with a way of being that reflects in some minute ways the relational aspects of the Holy Trinity, the sharing of mutual love, honor, joy and respect, that the early church leaders described as a beautiful, powerful, dynamic dance.

Throughout Scripture we are given the dance steps, guidance, including our text from Romans that we read today. It starts with “...we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...” and it ends with “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” The “Three” are there...our Lord Jesus Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit. Just as Augustine on the beach desired a logical way to explain the Trinity, a logical question comes to mind having heard this verse, the question: do we have peace? Do you? Do I? It’s sometimes easier to work for peace, than to live in peace: from a global context to our home environments. Living in peace can be harder than “doing” peaceful actions and “being” at peace can be harder than living in peace. Peace begins within...within ourselves, and then in our most immediate, primarily relationships. If we want to be a peacemaker, that is where we start, in our relationships with God, our spouses, parents, children, friends, extended family, and church family. Then we can authentically live that holy relational life modeled in the mystery of the Trinity within our communities, nation, and world. And it’s not just being a peacemaker; it’s about every aspect of our lives. We can “do” things without “being” something. For example, we can do parenting that doesn’t mean we are “being” a parent. We can “do” a spousal relationship that’s different than “being” a spouse. You get the idea...you can fill in the blank...it’s here that the bucket list gets more challenging because it calls us to change. We can “do” events...things, but that is different than “being” in holy relationships with others.

How are we to be in holy relationships, through the Holy Spirit that has been poured into our hearts? The Holy Spirit helps us to ask, that important question, that strengthens our faith and being, that question, “remember when?” The Holy Spirit reminds us of God in all three manifestations. The Holy Spirit reminds us all things that Jesus taught us. Remember when...we learned to be peacemakers? Remember when...we were called to be servants? Remember when...we first experienced God’s love and forgiveness. Remember when...we learned to love God first, and others as ourselves. Remember when, we thought life was about events and then we realized that there was more...more to check off our bucket lists before we die, the essential ways of being that make a life whole. Throughout life, the Holy Spirit helps us to remember when we, the whole church and individuals in it, first joined the eternal dance of mutual love, honor, happiness, joy and respect started long ago at the beginning of all time by the Holy Trinity.

On this Trinity Sunday and on this Memorial Day weekend, in all of the events we share in, as we remember the sacrifices of others, may the Holy Spirit also help us to remember when...!

1. Lindy Black, Sermon Nuggets, 2010
2. Paul Young, The Shack, page 101
3. U.S. Catholic Monthly Magazine 1990