

**"The Trinity as the Story of Our Community"
The Rev. James S. Ward, Rector**

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My youthful loss of faith came right on schedule.

At the age of sixteen I went alone on a ski weekend to the Sierra Club lodge on old Hwy 40 over Donner Pass. On my way home on the Greyhound Bus I met a young woman from Berkeley a year older or so but who was much more sophisticated than I. As we got acquainted I told her of how involved I was in my church. She carefully and rather nonchalantly explained to me that she couldn't understand how anyone could bow down to something bigger than themselves. I thought about it all the way home and the next week and realized that I couldn't either. I stopped going to church.

My youthful crisis of faith came right on schedule.

That year Time magazine announced on its cover trumpeting the theology of the moment "God is Dead." All the contemporary controversies of faith were concerned at that time to respond to the major challenge of atheism essentially posed by monolithic 19th century science.

None of them engaged the issue of the Trinity. Until science itself became more nuanced and fanciful with the likes of thermodynamics, black holes and string theory, the Trinity was too outlandish a notion to offer as plausible. But now this has all changed.

Most recently we have turned in two directions in order to give an account of believing in God: Community and Story. Where these directions intersect we find the Trinity.

The power of story is that it can bring us into a particular location, into the presence of another, or in proximity with a particular set of relationships, while leaving us entirely free to accept or reject it, to yield or resist it.

The story of Jesus brings hearers into relationship with Jesus and with those surrounding him in the story world of the gospels. But reading or telling Jesus as the story of God, as in John's gospel, brings us into relationship with God.

That is it brings us into relation with that fullness of relationship with God, which Jesus receives as a gift, and that is intended as God's purpose for every human being.

Another way of saying this is that God's presence and particularity is to be found in Jesus' presence or particularity. But Jesus' particularity is to be found in any and every person. That's how we frame it in the baptismal covenant: seek and serve Christ in all persons.

A week ago I was showing Bede Rice's daughter the work on the Memorial Garden in the courtyard. We paused at her mother and father's stone and she pointed out to me that they had put Bede's name in italics because it showed of the unique spelling of her mother's maiden name "de Jung" and the fact that it had a small "d" was something she always passionately emphasized. By telling me the little detail of that story she brought her wonderful mother into proximity to us, or us into proximity with her.

The category of story represents the dynamic and personal dimension that reveals the meaning or significance of another person. Thus it is a category of judgment. How we give an account of our faith in God has everything to do with how we tell the story of our own life and our own commitments, our successes and failures. And insofar as the account of our faith has to do with if and how our personal life-story intersects with the story of Jesus and with all those, living and dead, whose life stories have intersected with his, then the story of our faith is open ended. Then our story participates in, becomes an episode of the story of the Trinity. We have passed through judgment. And our own story has become a story that can bring its hearers into the proximity of the fullness of a relationship with God in Jesus that we receive as a gift. The Trinity is God as story.

Community embodies unity in diversity. Our ability through story to empathize and identify with another whose life experience and commitments are so different than our own, our ability to receive even partially or imperfectly the fullness of relation with another makes community possible.

To account for God as a community is simply to connect the uniqueness of a particular moment in history and the universal longing for oneness. The Trinity is not so much a model for God as it is the outworking of the unique particularity of our relationships and the common aspiration and apprehension of unity. Yet the unity we experience from the world is always frustrated. It is always at someone's expense. The story of Jesus, his death and resurrection, exposes the world's unity as based on violence.

To feature God as a community of persons acknowledges that living in community is the divine purpose for human beings. So the inner relatedness or relation-ality of God as three persons is the model for our communities. God is the communion of the Church's life. And by the gift of the Spirit Jesus offers not a new form of the

world's unity inevitably based on exclusion and violence but personal and communal incorporation into the life of the community of God.

We enter the true community for which we long by our nature, the communion of God's own life-in-relation, to the extent that we are willing to give up our lives and the illusion of our lives as private, self-determining, self-made individuals and join the adventure of God's self-offering love for the life of the world.

In our life in communion here at St. Stephen's we sometimes talk of receiving God or "the life of God in the hand." It is this radical act of particularity, this hand reaching out to receive this piece of bread at this table, that we claim unites us to God universally. This simple gesture of receiving the life of God as a gift is the major affirmation of our unity in diversity.

Facing each other as we stand to receive the sacrament around this table, especially when we have strongly held and divergent opinions that we dare to share in listening and loving conversation, this is the way in which we discover the unity of God in Christ in the otherness and particularity revealed in each other. It is the most difficult exchanges in that conversation that bring in us the greatest opportunities to grow in the Spirit because these often involve the death of our illusions and the risk of our self certainty.

Our ability to behold the fullness of relationship with God in another, that is the extent that we are to find in another and they in us a self-forgetting love, the kind of love the persons of the Trinity have for one another, enables an overcoming of all boundaries and barriers. Faith is the experience of being in the fullness of relation with another or in communion with others without fear, without the fear of limitation or death.

The language we use in justifying our faith in God must be language of our own time. Trinitarian faith in our time is inevitably a matter of the stories we tell about our communities.

Last week I asked a question in the 9:15 service about the story of Babel. "Who knows the story?" I said.

One of our bright and motivated bible ten-year old students told me the story. "The people were building a tower and God . . uh . . God got . . uh . . angry . . . and confused their language so they could no longer understand each other."

Well, I can tell you from personal experience, problems of communication on a building project are immense. But what struck me and made me want to stop the whole story and begin to go in an entirely new direction was the issue of God

becoming angry. That detail is of course part of the story from there in Genesis. But is the portrayal of God in that story misleading or accurate? Does a high view of the authority of the Bible mean that there are no examples in narrative point of view of human unreliability or duplicity in the stories it tells? Must the narrator of the tale always be so filled with the spirit of truth that he or she is never hiding from God or from themselves by the way in which they tell or spin the story?

Another important detail of this story is that the people wanted in building this tower to “make a name for themselves” so that they wouldn’t be scattered over face of the earth. They appear to be in rivalry with God and even project that rivalry onto their portrayal of God. According to the story, God became nervous, “If they can do this, what will keep them from being able to do what ever they want?” he said. As story-tellers and sense makers out of our own experience, we have this temptation as well. We can project onto God our own fear and envy. We can blame God for our inability to communicate, and we can make God responsible for our failures and for the violence and exclusion that holds us together.

I wanted to stop and explain all of this to my bright young helper last week at the 9:15 family service, but there was no time.

The gift of the spirit allows us to overcome our divisions of language and culture and to hear the story in such a way as to see through it the invitation of Jesus into the loving community of God our Father.

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