

IF YOU LOVE ME

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John 14:15-26 - Jesus speaks of his Father and the Holy Spirit

“If you love me.” That’s how this whole passage begins—“If you love me.” Jesus is talking about his relationship with the Father, and about the advocate or Holy Spirit who is to come. We have, therefore, the three persons of the Trinity. If Mary Ann and I ever compared notes we would probably notice the complementarity of our children’s time; we just trust the Holy Spirit to make it all blend beautifully. In those stories she told, the name of God, the ultimate name, is “One,” and God is one and three.

So what I’m talking about today is the other side of that--the “three.” In the “one and the three” we have the complete doctrine of the Trinity. Notice that it’s the Spirit that put it together. I want to point out some of the things in today’s gospel reading that are a strong recurring motif in the way Jesus talks about the Father, himself, and the Holy Spirit. The motif that runs through it all is relational. I haven’t counted, but the word “love” must occur a dozen times; and it’s about the relationship, about the presence, about the sacred, coming to us. It starts off with *Alf* you love me.” In other words, Jesus is leaving some precious words of wisdom with them at this moment near the end of his life. Because he is about to depart, he is telling them “the Father is with you, I am with you, the Holy Spirit is with you. You are not left alone--you’re not orphaned.”

So it all starts with “If you love me.” The heart of the Christian faith is this relationship, this loving one another. He says, “This is the spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” That relationship is much closer even than two people in friendship; it is a relationship whereby one is in the other. And yet maybe it’s not so different, because in the intimacy of friendship and love we do become a part of one another, don’t we? We do hold those we love in our hearts. Jesus says “I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you.” Isn’t that one of the deepest, most central questions--anguishing questions--of human existence? Are we orphaned? Are we left on our own? Have we no connection with something beyond ourselves? And so that is one of the most important things Jesus could have said to his disciples when they were about to lose him. “I will not leave you orphaned. You won’t be alone.” Our creed says “We are not alone. We live in God’s world.” God is with us always.

Jesus says “On that day you will know that I am in my Father.” Listen to how he says this: “I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you.” This mystical union of one in the other--God in us, we in God--is mystical language. It’s not a logical kind of language it’s not philosophical language; it’s actually paradoxical, obviously paradoxical. So it touches mysticism. We tend to get a strange feeling about mysticism as if it were something bizarre and deep and hard to understand. A lot of faith does, I admit, become mystified, but true mysticism isn’t something bizarre and esoteric. It’s actually very ordinary, but it’s the mystery of ordinary life. Isn’t real love mystical? How does that happen? How do we become so much a part of another? How does our life become so profoundly transformed by the love of family, by the love of a marriage partner, by the love of children and parents? Isn’t there something in that that is far beyond any explanation? Isn’t that the most ultimate and yet the most ordinary of mysticism in our lives? And that’s at the center of how Jesus describes God’s way of being with us. He says, “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, and those who love

me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” He doesn’t say, “If you love me then you should keep my commandments.” He says “If you love me, then you do keep my commandments.” Those just go together. It’s not like one is a condition of the other; it just flows from our love of God--”Those who love me keep my commandments.”

Later, Judas asks a question, a very poignant question if you think about it. It is at the heart of much of our struggle and anguish as the church. “How is it, Lord, that you reveal yourself to us and not to the world? How can that be?” How can this word of faith be so powerful and so present to all of us, and yet we live in a world where so many people and so much of the world seems to be oblivious of it? How could anybody not “get” God? Have you ever wondered that? Well, of course you have. We’ve all wondered that all our lives. That’s the very heart of the question that asks what the mission of the church is. To live in a world where there are actually people who don’t get it? How can that be? How can that be? That is Judas’s question. And Jesus seems not to answer the question directly; he merely reiterates what he just said: “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” He just reiterates that same statement. There isn’t some kind of rationalistic explanation. It is simply that relationship. How do you explain that? How do you explain love? How do you explain whom you fell in love with and whom you didn’t? How do you explain how that love persists and transforms your life? You can’t, and yet it’s foundational to so much in life. And that’s the foundation of God’s way of being with us, and our response to God.

What I have said so far is by way of introduction to what I want to say now. The relational aspect of biblical faith is central, and is probably one of the most “Trinitarian” parts of John’s gospel where there is this clear layout of the three--the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Throughout my years as a minister, the most common question I have heard in talking with people and hearing them speak about their faith and their faith questions, or the issue where people most commonly feel confused, probably relates to the Trinity. What is this doctrine of the Trinity and how can we understand it? Why is it so hard to understand? Those are important questions, aren’t they, because this doctrine is undoubtedly the heart of our faith? It is our understanding of the sacred, and of the sacred in the world and with us. So we’re in big trouble if our understanding of the sacred is confusing to us.

Why is it confusing? Well, it’s because we don’t usually talk about the Trinity in this way, in the way Jesus does in John’s gospel. We talk about the Trinity more in the way we hear it in the Nicene Creed or the Athanasian Creed. Those creeds emerged out of the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century and the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century. That was a time when Christianity was being understood in the context of the Roman Empire, and in the background more of Greek philosophical thought than Hebrew biblical thought. And the questions with which people struggled were an entirely different set of questions. They were questions about how spirit and matter can join together; and if God is pure spirit then how can God have entered into matter. And so they used the Greek concept *ousia* which we translate as “substance” although it has a much deeper meaning than “substance.” That’s what the “One” is-- God is one substance and three persons. Now “person” is the Greek word *prosopon* which really means “face” rather than “person,” and has that sense of God appearing in three faces or three appearances even though there is only one substance.

They had a problem a century later at the Council in Chalcedon and they asked about the nature of Jesus. Was he human or was he divine? They said, “Well, you know, if he was divine he couldn’t be human because to be human is to be limited whereas to be divine is not to be limited.” And they said “Well, Jesus has to be both human and divine.” Because these two natures can’t be half and half; Jesus must be both entirely divine and entirely human even though that sounds like a bit of a paradox. And so we have our doctrine of the Trinity. Understand????

You see, the Greco-Roman world of the fourth and fifth centuries was asking an entirely

different set of questions than those which the Hebrew people of Jesus' time were asking about God. The Hebrew questions were much simpler: "Is God with us or not? God used to be with us, and because it seems we've mucked it up somehow how do we get it back--how do we reconcile our relationship with God?" It was a question about the presence of God. It was a question of this nature of ours; are we naturally evil or are we naturally good? What do we do with that if we're in a world that has gone so wrong that we seem distant and broken off from God. How do we come back into a relationship with God? It was, in other words, an entirely different set of questions.

We're living in a very exciting time to be Christian. That doctrinal work of the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon in the fourth and fifth centuries became established as Christian orthodoxy enforced by the Roman legions as they established the Roman Empire and changed Christianity from a living faith into a dominant force, a political domination of the world--what theologians have called "Christendom."

Theologians such as John Spong and Douglas Hall say we're living just off the end of Christendom. From the fourth to the twentieth centuries, sixteen hundred years of Christendom, Christianity was dominated by this orthodox doctrine that was established and enforced. Those who disagreed were the heretics, and they were suppressed. Theologians are saying we're living off the end of Christendom; that period has come to an end. For many of us that orthodoxy doesn't work any more. But the exciting thing is that if we set aside all that substantialistic philosophical kind of thought that is the context for Trinitarian orthodoxy, we can hear the Bible for what it is. We can hear the witness of the scriptures, especially of Jesus' life and ministry. And the new church born out of that can hear those words more directly without the questions that ask how Jesus could be a human being if he was divine, and so on. Set those questions aside. They're not addressed in John's gospel. Jesus didn't talk about them; he talked about the question of whether God is with us, whether God still loves us. If Jesus is with us and then leaves us, how are we to know the sacred with us? And so there's this talk of the Father who is in us and we in the Father. Jesus said "I'm in you and you are in me, and when I go I will send the Holy Spirit--the advocate--to be with you. You are not going to be left alone; you are not going to be orphaned." The question of the nature or substance of God doesn't arise. So it's at once a kind of crisis because many of us have been deeply shaped in our faith by Nicene orthodoxy. And yet it has also been a barrier. When we can step past that barrier and really hear the biblical witness without having to filter it through all that orthodox doctrine, something new comes to life.

A few days ago we had a study of a new statement of faith which the United Church of Canada is writing. (The last statement was written in 1940.) It's about ten pages long and is in draft form. We are invited to send feedback, and then a final form will come to General Council in 2006. The statement begins with a little bit of talk about Trinity, and I'd like to read it to give you a sense of what some people are trying to say about where the United Church is going:

God is Holy Mystery,

Beyond complete knowledge, above perfect description. [And then the statement goes right into the relational.]

Yet in love, the one eternal God creates and seeks relationship:

within the Divine being [that is, between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit],

with creation, with us [God seeks relationship with us].

[Now here's where it gets into some new language for Trinity, this three-part statement]

Creating all that is, God provides the very possibility of our being and relating.

Tending all that is, God mends the broken and reconciles the estranged.

Enlivening all that is, God completes what God began.

[Do you see how they're trying to name that three-part understanding of God in a way that expresses God reaching out into relationship with us, and then describes our response to the sacred, also in a three-part form. It says:]

Grateful for God's loving action, we cannot then be silent.

In awe and trust, we speak of God: [That's the challenge isn't it, how to use words, what words do we use. So here's another three-part statement.]

known in creation, in history, and as the one whom Jesus called Father;

known in the life, death, and resurrection of the child of Wisdom, Jesus the Christ;

known in the revitalizing and transforming power as the Holy Spirit.

I find this draft statement exciting. I find it liberating. I've not been in the church because I have got it all and because all was fine. I've had a sense that there is something I can't quite get to. But I've had a sense throughout my life that the way it was when the church started out was good and clean and powerful, but that it has become very convoluted as the church has developed.

At one time in my life I walked away from the church because I decided there was no way that original truth, Jesus Christ, could have survived the convoluted mess of the church's history. But then I had an experience within a group of people who were opening their hearts to one another and to the sacred, and I experienced the power of that presence of God's spirit in the midst of these people who were gathered in his name. And despite all the convoluted mess throughout the centuries that spirit still cut through and touched my heart, and I could see it touching the hearts of others, drawing us together with transforming power in our lives. That became the heart of faith for me. And so it's an invitation for each of us to name that Trinity--that way in which we experience God coming to us, the way we know God--and to name it in a thousand different ways rather than to become locked into just one way. It's an invitation for each of us to do that, and I find myself feeling liberated and drawn into it too.

As I think of God the creator, I think it answers the question of who I am. Am I just a degenerate, worthless being, waiting passively for God to save me? Or am I a person created in the image of God, with a goodness and a courage from the sacred in the heart of my being? For me it's the latter; it's that high view of human nature rather than the low view. That's what the creator says to me. And when I try to name what Jesus really is--that story, that historical moment--it's the way Jesus was in the world. One of the most important questions for me is how we can live in this messed up world of ours. How do we live in the face of evil? Jesus lives that for us and shows us that even death can't destroy; it only exposes the evil in the world. And then the questions: "So that? Now what? Where do I go, what do I do, how do I live my life day to day?" The Holy Spirit gives me the answers by leading, guiding, and showing me the way in which I can listen deeply to the Spirit. What I receive is conviction, insight, and wisdom, as to how I can make my way through life day to day. It liberates me from all the substantialist philosophy of orthodox Trinitarian doctrine so that I can simply listen directly to the gospel witness that talks about how God is with us, how Christ is with us, how God is with us in the Holy Spirit, and how God comes to us and transforms our lives.

I want to read to you the third verse of the hymn we're about to sing, "Come Down, O love Divine," which is one of my all time favourite tunes. It's about the Holy Spirit, and the third verse talks about our yearning and the response:

And so the yearning strong with which the soul will long
shall far outpass the power of human telling;
for none can guess its grace, till love creates the place
wherein the Holy Spirit makes its dwelling.

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