

27 May 2018

Trinity Sunday

Romans 8:15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery, to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption. John 3:17 Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

A NOTE ON TRINITY SUNDAY

Fr. Gary Gooch pulled me aside in the parish library and said, "Jim, if you want to hear the worse sermon of the year in a large Episcopal Church, be sure to attend on Trinity Sunday, because the least experienced priest will be doing the sermon. No senior priest wants to preach on that difficult subject." Well, Lord. Here I am. The only person lower in the pecking order than a young priest is an old layman. I am sure that Fr. Gary's prophecy is in good hands.

Ah, but the young priest is laboring under the burden of knowledge, whereas I have recourse to my usual disclaimer: "Laymen venture where priests are too wise to go." Consequently, I have solved the Trinity Sunday sermon problem with an all-encompassing solution in only three words: Acceptance through faith. That is it. I need no more. So now let me turn to the topic of today's meditation:

SAVING THE WORLD ONE PERSON AT A TIME, STARTING WITH ONESELF

Conservationists like to remind us to "think globally, act locally." There is a planet to be saved, but most of us are not going to be a Jean Goodall or Jacques Cousteau appearing on the world stage. The best most of us can do is to recycle and maybe own a car that gets a bit better gas mileage than my Old's 442 of a few decades ago. We all need to recognize that the world needs a spiritual revitalization, but few of us are going to be a Paul or Silas or even a Schweitzer that great concert organist who gave up his concert career to become a medical doctor serving in the mission fields of Africa. We each have a much more modest calling: To be spiritual in the here and now. For most of us, that is challenge enough!

What is the spiritual life? Perhaps the place to start is asking ourselves what is the spiritual life? Let us revisit today's text. First from John where we read Jesus saying "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." This is followed by Paul writing to the Romans: ". . . you did not receive the spirit of slavery, to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption." God is not interested in destroying the world and you need have no fear. We know that in our unspiritual world fear sells: It sells deodorants and politicians to unsuspecting consumers. Fear makes the world seem like a frightening place, filled with people and institutions out to do us harm. For many people fear is so pervasive that all reason is lost and they wish to either retreat from the world or to attack it. They have become slaves to fear. This is the very opposite of what Jesus is telling humankind. We have received, if we are really believers, the spirit of adoption. We need to give meaning to that old saying: We are brothers and sisters in Christ. When we let our fears govern us we are rejecting that adoption which Jesus has given us.

We know that the spiritual life is a life without fear. That does not mean that dangers don't exist. It does mean that we need not surrender our rationality, or our ability to love, to fear. It changes our behavior from blinding hate and attack to love and problem solving.

Of course, the absence of fear is not enough: the spiritual life is also the presence of active love. We all know that salvation is by grace alone. It is one of the sad ironies of Christianity that thousands of people lost their lives on one side or the other of that debate. We kneel in worship and appreciation of that salvation, but, eventually, we need to get off our knees and DO SOMETHING, DO SOME ACTIVE LOVE.

First of all, it is relationship building. And the first relationship we need to build is with ourselves. If you don't love yourself, you are not going to love anyone else. Actively loving yourself means forgiving yourself when you make a mistake or when you sin. God has forgiven you, who are you to wallow in remembrance of past failures – accept God's love and move on with your life. My first prayer of the day is when I am still in bed and I say thank you God for giving me another day. Let me do something useful today. Sometimes at night, I close my day by praying: God, are you sure that you should have given me this day? I think that I did more harm than good. Fortunately, God forgives us. Loving ourselves, we are then capable of building loving relationships with others. Family, spouses, friends, workmates. In ever widening circles our active love embraces more people.

Eventually, we begin to build communities of faith. That community may start small. Perhaps our church family is our first attempt at community building. But with active love our community of concern grows to include the places where we live and even far beyond our national borders. We may well express that active love in small ways: Trying to be better neighbors, better caretakers of pets and people, better participation in civic affairs, more support of world missions. As we grow in spiritual awareness and experience the fruits of our spirit of adoption by Christ, there is no limit to the saving seeds that we may sow.

We are alive with joy and live without fear, spreading salvation one person at a time. Whether our stage is small or large we have the boldness to seize paradise itself as God's promise to the world.

Here is a little poem by Emily Dickinson that catches the joy of salvation.

I dwell in Possibility

A fairer house than Prose,

More numerous of windows,

Superior of doors.

O chambers, as the cedars—

Impregnable of eye;

And for an everlasting roof

The gables of the sky.

Of visitors—the fairest--

For occupation—this--

The spreading wide my narrow hands

To gather Paradise