

Rev Rita Message- May 30 2021

When I was studying to be a minister, I had a professor by the name of Helene Castel. She did not lecture about the New Testament or even the old one. She didn't teach doctrine or church history. But she did teach a course in learning to integrate what we were learning in our other classes with what was happening in our lives and the lives of the people we worked with as student ministers in a congregation. In her classroom, she had a sign hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room. The sign said: If you think you have all the answers then you haven't asked all the questions.

The story of Nicodemus reminds me of that sign. Nicodemus was supposed to be the guy with all the answers. He was, first, a Pharisee – a theologian who knew the Hebrew scriptures... what we label as the Old Testament.... inside out. He was respected for his strict adherence to all law of Moses that governed the spiritual lives of the Jews at that time. He and the 69 other men on the Sanhedrin had jurisdiction over all the religious affairs of Israel. If you had a question about what was right and what was wrong, you would want someone like Nicodemus to be available to sort things out.

And yet, in this morning's scripture reading, Nicodemus has so many questions that he can't wait until morning for answers. He shows up on Jesus' door step in the middle of the night. Questions and answers go back and forth. As a result, Nicodemus' life begins to change. A new understanding of God and who Jesus is and what it means to be faithful was born in the heart of Nicodemus. Later in John's gospel, we find him defending Jesus to the other religious leaders and then, when Jesus dies on the cross, Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus' body.

We all have life experiences when it feels as if life has more questions than answers. At a movie theater, which arm rest is yours? Do vegetarians eat animal crackers? Why do they call the little candy bars, like the ones you can buy at Hallowe'en, why are they called "fun sizes"? When does it stop being partly cloudy and start being partly sunny?

Today is Trinity Sunday in the life of the Christian church. It is unique because it does not celebrate a person or event like the birth of Jesus at Christmas or the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. But rather it remembers how the church tried to answer some big faith questions that have been with the church since its earliest beginnings.

One of those big faith questions was this: If we believe there is only one God then how does it work when you consider that God is "in the heavens" so to speak as creator of the universe, dwelt among us in the person of Jesus, and is present among us as the Holy Spirit? Doesn't that sound like three different Gods?

The doctrine of the Trinity gradually came together and was embraced by most of the Christian church in 325 A.D. at the first ecumenical gathering of the Christian church in Nicaea... current maps would label it as Iznik Turkey.

There had been increasing friction among the church leaders of that time. For the good of the Christian church and, of course, for the good of the Roman Empire, Emperor Constantine called a meeting to settle things down and to come to a basic agreement about the answer to a question that is impossible to answer.

On Trinity Sunday, Christians remember and honor the mystery that there is one God in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.... In other words: the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer.

Trinity Sunday is a day for the church to think about how it understands God and how it lives out that understanding. Who is God and what is God like? Answers can be found in the Bible and also from personal experience.

The first Christians knew that the answer was that God was creator of all that was and is and they also knew that God was so much more. They would have recalled the stories of how God heard the cries of the people and brought them out of Egyptian slavery and cared for them. This was not a God who watched from afar but rather a God who was like a father or a mother who loved and protected their children.

Who is God and what is God like? Through the witness of the disciples and those who first followed Jesus, the stories about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection revealed a God who dwelt among us. When you hear the name Emmanuel in reference to Jesus, Emmanuel means God-with-us. God was made manifest in Jesus to ensure that the faith community understood that God was not just out there, but lived as one of us. God was not only creator but also savior and redeemer.

Those early followers came to understand God as the Holy Spirit. As promised by Jesus, the gift of the Spirit came on Pentecost. It came to the whole community and not just a select few. One would have thought that the spirit would come to the disciples and their friends only, but the spirit came to the gathered group that represented people from all over the region. They spoke different languages and were from different cultures yet they heard the word of God in their own language.

The Trinity is the understanding that God is at work in an abundance of ways. God is in the world, in the story of Christ, and in the hope deep within us. God draws us to abundant life through the wonder of creation, the love of Jesus, and the spirit that holds us. God is over us as Creator, with us as Christ, and in us as the Spirit.

The story is told of an old man who lived on a farm in the mountains of eastern Kentucky with his young grandson. Each morning, Grandpa was up early sitting at the kitchen table reading from his old worn-out Bible. His grandson who wanted to be just like him tried to imitate him in any way he could.

One day the grandson asked, "Grandpa, I try to read the Bible just like you but I don't understand it, and what I do understand I forget as soon as I close the book. What good does reading the Bible do?"

The Grandfather quietly turned from putting coal in the stove and said, "Take this coal basket down to the river and bring back a basket of water."

The boy did as he was told, even though all the water leaked out before he could get back to the house.

The grandfather laughed and said, "You'll have to move a little faster next time," and sent him back to the river with the basket to try again.

This time the boy ran faster, but again the basket was empty before he returned home. Out of breath, he told his grandfather that it was impossible to carry water in a basket, and he went to get a bucket instead.

The old man said, "I don't want a bucket of water; I want a basket of water. You can do this. You're just not trying hard enough," and he went out the door to watch the boy try again.

At this point, the boy knew it was impossible, but he wanted to show his grandfather that even if he ran as fast as he could, the water would leak out before he got far at all. The boy scooped the water and ran hard, but when he reached his grandfather the basket was again empty. Out of breath, he said, "See Grandpa, it's useless!"

"So you think it is useless?" The old man said, "Look at the basket." The boy looked at the basket, and for the first time he realized that the basket looked different. Instead of a dirty old coal basket, it was clean.

"Son, that's what happens when you read the Bible. You might not understand or remember everything, but when you read it, it will change you from the inside out.

That is the work of God in our lives. To change us from the inside out and to slowly transform us into the image of God's son.

Trinity Sunday reminds us that there is always more to God than we conceive, more of God than we can explain, more than we can sing or preach or prove. God is as near as our breath, but not so familiar as to be completely understood. God is beyond time and space, but not so mysterious as to be inaccessible. And it reminds me that God does not expect us to always have all the answers but to have the willingness to open ourselves to the questions that arise when we open our lives up to God and we trust in God and the ways of God.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Amen.