



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Trinity is Never the End

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 31, 2015
The First Sunday after Pentecost — Trinity Sunday: Based on John 3:1-17*

As I approached this Trinity Sunday, it occurred to me that this might be the year when I get the Trinity thing sorted out—once and for all, am I in or am I out? But honestly as the time passed, the idea never got a lot of traction for me. Frankly, there's some other stuff on my mind this morning. But before I get to that, let me just say this about the Trinity: it's not a burning issue for me. In fact, I don't really think about it much at all. Even in some late night boozy conversations during seminary when up and coming priest-types pontificated about such matters, I tended to doze off pretty early or maybe even watch a rerun of *Magnum: PI*.

But God—well, God is a subject that honestly is never far from my mind, no joke; and while I can't prove this, I think this is not true only for me, not just for some priest on his last day at a fabulous church in New York City who thinks about this because he can't think about anything else, but true for everyone. While Augustine missed on some things, he got this right: "You have made us for yourself," he wrote of God all those years ago in *Confessions*, "and our hearts are restless until they can find rest in you." A godless, secular society is an illusion of the fearful; there is no such thing. Of course, evil and denial exist, but even there each of us is in search of God, perhaps wrong-mindedly, but in search of the rest, the contentment that comes only from God. Our thrashing about, getting and spending, finding and losing, our following this rainbow and that one—all of it is in the end and in the beginning about our search for God. God is the ground of it all, the very essence of being, our North, our South, our East and West, the air we breathe.

As for Jesus, I am totally smitten and always have been. When I thought he was a celestial action hero and even after I realized he wasn't, the person of Jesus, the man I believe he was, the way he lived and loved, means everything to me; and I try to emulate him, asking myself on occasion what I imagine he would do in a particular circumstance. Honestly it works fairly poorly, but truth be told, I can't imagine what I'd be like without his having shown the way, without his having provided an ethic for living that is both no more or less rational than it was 2000 years ago and absolutely no less crucial for authentic living. All that he was flies in the face of what any culture teaches; and, yet, for me it is the way of truth. For the record, which in my opinion always needs to be acknowledged at such confessional moments, others have found their way through some other story. But for me Jesus is the man.

The Holy Spirit is the most nebulous of the three and arguably the one we experience the most palpably. We say things like, "I felt the spirit" or "the spirit moved me"; and I have no quarrel with any of it. I feel the spirit this morning, and it feels pretty holy and pretty sweet to me. And beyond that, I know there have been times in my life, really, really difficult moments, when some presence I didn't always know what to call sustained me, kept me going, whispered to me that as awful as the moment was, it wouldn't always be this way, a presence that hovered near with no manipulating power but with all the strength I ever needed to keep from disintegrating. In those moments, I believe it was the spirit of God sustaining me. And maybe even more than what I have known in my own life, I have seen some other people endure losses so great that but for the spirit of God, they simply would have stopped being. I have stood by them, holding them tightly as I could, as they lost children and lovers; and, yet, I have witnessed them somehow live to tell their story and to know in the most unlikely way joy again—evidence, living evidence of the Holy Spirit.

How these three are connected, who proceeds from whom, and even whether I have the right names associated with any one of them matters less to me than it ever has. The notion of the Trinity, which is a fine notion as notions go, was derived by the church fathers in the 4th century as an effort to settle a bunch of fights within the church and frankly to put an end to speculating about God. Of course, it settled nothing, certainly none of the fights; and most happily of all, those who wanted to control the speculating about God failed miserably, marvelously so. That is what I love the most about the whole story. The entire conversation teaches us in the 21st century what it taught those with hearts to hear in the 4th century: all efforts to understand, explain, or conscribe God are preposterous. They are not ill-intended necessarily—it is natural to try to understand; and they only morph into being dangerous when they become emphatic or what some would call orthodox. The only ultimate truth is that any ultimate conclusion about God is simply ludicrous. Only we are explained by our ongoing

attempts to understand God, whether in precisely Trinitarian or Unitarian or pantheistic terms. Such efforts explain us, not God. The only reason to keep yammering about this point is that for religion to begin to deepen our lives rather than fracture them, we have to admit that efforts to be precise, definitive, and therefore doctrinaire about beliefs are ineluctably doomed and distractive.

Now that I have that off my chest, this is what I really want to talk about this morning: Above all, the way I most know and experience God is through the lives and loves of others. God-bearers—that's what all of us are. God-bearers. As extraordinary and often quite inexplicable as it appears, it is true: we bear God to one another. Jesus often said, "The Kingdom of God is within." It is inside us, and the way it continues to come into the world is that we bring it; we bear it to one another and to the world. It is not a sin of humanism to admit that we have a critical role in the God process; our cooperation is the promise of God and the reason we are here.

You, my beloved friends, have brought God to me. From the first moment I tried to convince you that even with a name like Buddy, I truly had not arrived on a watermelon truck and that as far as I know, I have never been married to a cousin, even from that very moment, you have been for me the occasion and joy of God. You loved quickly, easily and deeply, inviting me into your lives with the rare privilege of familiarity even before it was earned; and in the process you changed me, formed me even at this ripe age, creating new vistas in my heart and soul for the presence of God, new connections, new insights, new hopes and dreams.

Together we have buried our dead, baptized our young, married our hopeful, even coming to see in this time together the surprise and joy of marriage equality for all; we have cradled the sad when hopes and dreams have crashed and rejoiced in moments of soaring joy when all the planets seemed to be aligned; we have gathered at an open table when the presence of God was so near it could be felt and tasted, and when it seemed remote and imaginary; we have sung and laughed and cried and argued; we have talked about money till I thought I'd turn into a pledge card; we have sought to care for those less fortunate than we; and through it all we have worshipped and prayed as best we could, believing when we could, hoping when we couldn't and loving through it all.

I am profoundly changed by your love; my own experience of God is deeper for having known God in you; and my gratitude for the generous giving of yourselves to our common life is deeper than I can ever say and will linger forever in my heart of hearts.

In the name of God: *Amen.*