

Beyond endurance

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on Trinity Sunday, May 30, 2010.

Knowing that suffering produce endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Romans 5:3-5

I bind unto myself today the strong Name of the Trinity, by invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three.

Hymn 370 Saint Patrick's Breastplate

When children learn that they were created by God they understandably ask, "Who made God?" What we learn in time is that God has always been with us. Rather than an invention of the human mind, God is a discovery of the human experience. On this Trinity Sunday we remember the three most important ways in which we know and experience God as Father and Creator, as Son and Redeemer and as Spirit and Sanctifier. More than a doctrine, more than words in the creed, the Trinity is better experienced than explained.

God is continually involved in creation and in re-creation and the Holy Spirit of God empowers and sustains that continuing process. All of us bear the responsibility for the care and protection of God's creation. What we affirm in the creed is a statement about how God is involved in sustaining the ongoing process of creation and redemption.

Each of us comes to our own personal understanding of God through personal experience. When we use such terms as the face, heart, hands, mind and voice of God, we are using our own human terms to describe one who is above all human description. In the ancient Greek, *Pantokrator* describes the Creator of the universe and *Paraclete* describes God's Spirit as Protector, Guide, Source, Comforter and Advocate. With all our finite attempts to know the infinite God, we still only have a partial understanding. The infinite God and finite humanity are brought together in the person of Christ Jesus, both fully God and fully human.

In the Hebrew ELOHIM describes God's creative nature; JEHOVAH or YAHWEH refers to God's eternal nature and ADONAI refers to God's dominion over all. The more informal and personal ABBA means father or "daddy" describing the parental and creative nature of God. With our finite attempts to describe the nature of the infinite, God is not bound by our human limitations of time and space. The Bible assures us that there will come a time when we shall come face to face with God who will not be a stranger.

To say that we are made in the image of God doesn't mean that we look like God or that God looks like us, but that we are created intentionally with purpose and design. Our relationship with God and each other is triangular, a trinity of persons.

One illustration of how the one God is revealed and experienced in three most important ways is that we are a son or daughter to our parents, a husband or wife to our spouse, a brother or sister to our siblings, and an uncle or aunt to our nephew and niece, but we are still one and same person known in different ways. Another example of God's Trinitarian nature is how hydrogen dioxide, H₂O, appears in three distinct forms as liquid, as ice and as steam, still the same substance in different forms.

The Nicene Creed that we say together each Sunday was developed at the council held in the city of Nicea in the year 325 A.D. to reaffirm what Christians believe to be the nature of God revealed in the three most important ways.

A much more complicated creed is that of Saint Athanasius found in the historical documents of our Prayer Book, (pages 864-865) The simplest illustration of the Trinity is the shamrock traditionally used by Saint Patrick to illustrate the three persons of God from the same source. God is great in majesty and power and at the same time is warm, personable and close. In the person of Christ Jesus, we learn that we in a trinity of relationships with each other and God.

There are times when we may sense God's close presence and other times when our relationship may seem very distant. When we are experiencing high stress and may not feel very close, it is because we are distracted. It is only after we gain perspective that we realize God has been there all along. Saint Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character and character produces hope. When we undergo times of testing in our studies, our workplace, in our marriage or while enduring a serious illness and are barely able to put one foot in front of the other, we may gain greater strength of character.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day when we remember those who have fought and died for our country in wars and conflicts. They are examples of courage under fire. We remember those who are numbered among the unknowns who are buried where they fought and died as well as those who perished in prison camps. There are also those who survived the war and returned with shattered nerves caused by post-traumatic stress. Their families experienced the hardship of living with a survivor of the war survivor who had a volatile temper, suffered with depression and alcoholism and eventually took his own life. They and their families were casualties of war.

As an officer in my high school army ROTC unit, I learned the discipline and leadership of the military system and life. It was a time when our nation lived in relative peace. I marvel when I remember how I wore a saber as part of my uniform and practiced on the rifle range all inside the public school building. You wouldn't see that in schools today. I never gave much thought to the dreadful reality of war and the horrible slaughter of so many young lives on the battlefield, at sea and in the air. War is a deadly game. As we face the specter of our nation involved in endless conflicts, Plato reminds us that, "Only the dead have seen the end of war."

As we pay tribute to all affected by war, pray for a just and lasting peace and for the men and women of the armed forces who gave their lives in the service of their country. We pray for them because we hold them in our love. Our Trinitarian relationship with them and God lives on into eternity.

Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me.

Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

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