Living in Extraordinary Time

Trinity Sunday, June 4, 2023

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Yesterday was a day that registered well for me the peaks and valleys of our human experience. In the morning, with other members of the Sunrise Association of the Maine Conference of the United Church of Christ, I participated in the installation of my friend Andi Lloyd as pastor and teacher of the Trinitarian Congregational Parish of Castine. As you may remember from our own celebration just last summer, this occasion is just about as high church as the UCC gets. There was lovely music, a fantastic sermon given from a seminary classmate of mine and a charge to Andi and to the congregation from another friend who is the inaugural dean of Andover Newton Seminary at Yale, where the school is now embedded in the university. In the language of the day, including her being named “pastor and teacher,” I was reminded of my own ordination vows which include what we might call the “priestly” role. God has given to some of us the responsibility and privilege of serving others in the role of priest, such as is apparent in rites like the celebration of life of Kessler Parrott yesterday afternoon. The role of church in community remains incredibly significant, even while we reflect on diminishing numbers. So, this morning, I would like for us to think about who we are as church, but in so doing, we need to begin with our thinking about the God we gather to worship and serve.

We have just passed through the wonderful and somewhat long period of Eastertide. We have celebrated Pentecost, and find ourselves in the middle of what the liturgical calendar calls Ordinary Time. I change my stole to green, and we could begin to plod through the rest of the year until Advent if we were to forget what it is that God is about in the world, every day. Because of who God is and what God does in the world, each day is anything but ordinary. I would even venture to call life a matter of living in extraordinary time. Today is one we call Trinity Sunday, and in some ways, we could read verse 13 of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians and be done with the shortest sermon in history. We read about the grace of Christ, love of God and communion of the Holy Spirit, phrasing that I am sure is familiar to you from its being a part of our call to worship each Sunday. This is a wonderful, encapsulated view of our triune God. By way of a lesson and a directive, we could also focus on the last verses of Matthew, chapter 28, verses 16-20, on what is called the Great Commission.

16Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

So, let’s see . . . Jesus has all authority; we are to obey his commands; we are to teach others and to baptize them in Christ’s name—but not only in Christ’s name. We are to baptize in the name of the Father (whom I call our loving parent, or Mother and Father) and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Jesus introduces us to the way that God reveals Godself to us.

With all these descriptions, though, I know that for me, the nature of God is one big mystery. All that I have read about the church’s struggle to know and to understand God’s person is, frankly, baffling. Sure, we can try to know God as God touches our lives, but it may well be impossible to know just exactly who God is. Let’s try a bit together, though, as the morning goes on, and maybe we can begin to feel more confident talking about who it is that moves in our lives. In a way, inasmuch as the whole Bible is God’s good *news*, today’s readings are an excellent accounting of the good news of *God*. Yes, I *am* intentionally playing with words here. Today is Trinity Sunday, and the news is good. No, the news is great. God didn’t only create the world and make it good, and God didn’t simply give us life. God gave us Jesus to give us a good life. God *came* to us as Jesus to make us live—good.

Last week, we celebrated Pentecost, and yes, it is the birth of the church and the gift of the Spirit, God with us. This isn’t the end of the Spirit’s working, though, and it certainly isn’t the end of God with us. In the Book of John, Jesus bids his disciples farewell, and makes a promise that he is still keeping, with and for us. This is the mystery that blows me away, and that enlivens the entire Church. The Holy Spirit continues to teach us, because the Holy Spirit lives in us, or as Jesus put it, abides with us, and is in us. This is an astounding idea, because we say that the Holy Spirit is one of the three persons of God, and Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is *in us*. God is *in us*, Godself. What a gift, and what a responsibility!

I would like to ask for a bit of input from you, as much as any one of you is comfortable calling out a response. What do we think of when we think of God? Who is God, and what do we make of God’s qualities? **Leave time for their responses here, and jot them down. Don’t forget a pen!** Now, if all of this is who God is, when we say with the Quakers that there is “that of God in every person,” we take on quite an identity. Of course I do not mean to suggest that we *are* God. By no means are we God, but we are made in God’s image, as we learn in the first chapter of Genesis, and in Psalm 8 as we read together this morning.

It’s true, you know . . . God made us the stewards of all the other things that God has made. Happily, though, God didn’t just do this and then leave us to fend for ourselves. Not only did God become one of us in Jesus, our Lord. God sends the Holy Spirit, sometimes called the Advocate, in order to teach us. Jesus does not suggest that we are only to be taught, however; we are to teach. This is not everyone’s particular gift, though, and not everyone learns in the same way, either. Maybe we are simply meant to be bold enough to name our beliefs publicly, and to proclaim the names of the Triune God. We are because God is—in us. The sacrament of Communion that we celebrate this morning reminds us of this in very physical ways, while what takes place in the sacrament is part of the mystery of God’s working that is not easily described in terms we understand. We say that a sacrament is “an outward sign of an inward grace,” and we name the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in the act.

Do you know that the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ distinguishes itself from what may be more familiar faith statements, or creeds, because it doesn’t focus on who God is, but on what God does. By focusing on God’s deeds, we attest to something very physical. We also stress God’s *continuing activity* in the world. What a responsibility, then, to say that *we* are a community of God! What a responsibility, and what a wonderful challenge we have, guided and emboldened by the Holy Spirit, to act as the Body of Christ. We *can* talk about who God *is*, without ever talking about what we are required to *do* as believers. When we make a statement of faith, or pronounce a creed, we align ourselves with some very ancient history, with powerful traditions. “So we believe, and so shall we *live*,” as Paul reminds us. So shall we *proclaim* in the extraordinary time that is Christian living. Before we have Genesis, we have God, and God in all goodness reveals Godself to us in ever-greater ways as we learn to know God and seek justice in God’s name. Let us pray. **Gracious God, Loving Parent, Christ our Savior, Holy Spirit, Lord, we ask for your blessing on this day. Please teach us so that we may teach others to know you, and to help bring about your reign on Earth. Amen.**