

“The Starting Place”

Isaiah 6:1-13, John 3:1-17

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
Acting Senior Minister

May 30, 2021

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“The Starting Place”

Isaiah 6:1-13, John 3:1-17

+++++

Prayer for Illumination: God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may see and hear what you have for us this day. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Salvation. Amen.

+++++

A forest ranger described the most common question that visitors to his park ask the forest rangers. Many people, he said, come to the park to hike one of the beautiful trails that wander through the forest, trails designed to display the magnificent trees and plants, to let the hikers encounter the array of wildlife in the forest, and to take hikers on to hilltops for breathtaking views of the countryside. But the most frequent question that visitors ask the forest rangers is not “Where does this trail go?” or “How long does it take to hike it?” or “Do we need bug spray on the trail” but instead “Excuse me, can you tell me where the trail starts?”¹ It makes sense. No matter how lovely or breathtaking a trail may be, if you don’t know where the trail starts, you can’t hike it.²

I start here because today is Trinity Sunday, a day on the church’s calendar when we lift up the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity and proclaim that God is not one God, God alone, but that God is in three persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit (or God is Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer).

Quite understandably, you may consider the Trinity to be rather abstract and remote, something that others ponder and pontificate about. Something that is of little concern to us and how we live our everyday lives. I don't think that is true.

The doctrine of the Trinity is actually like a trail in a deep and mysterious forest called the life of God. If we walk this trail called Trinity, we will see and experience amazing things; we will discover something of what God is truly like, in all of God's beauty and wildness and splendor.

When we walk this trail in the forest called Trinity we see that God is not like what many people think. Some may think God is like a great big parent, a father or mother in the sky, or maybe a fearsome judge who stares down and makes us behave out of fear and guilt. Others think of God like a divine clockmaker who made the creation, wound it up, and let it tick away on its own. Others think God is like some distant star, cold, unblinking, shining out there somewhere, but far away from us and our lives.

But when we walk the trail called Trinity, we discover that God is not a fearsome judge or clockmaker or distant star, but God is a rather a community, in a living and dynamic communion of love and self-giving. The life that God has in God's being (Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer) is a life in which all three relate to one another, give to one another and love each other.

Remember the forest ranger, who knows where the trail starts? We can't go far without knowing where this life with God begins.

That brings us to Nicodemus. He's a pretty devout religious leader, one of the best. He's a Pharisee, and one among the high religious court called the Sanhedrin. He knows Jewish law inside and out.

Now, there is sometimes a difference between being religious, (even being a religious leader) and actually knowing God. Nicodemus has a very public commitment to God on the outside; but he wants, as many of us do, something more, something deeper, a relationship with God on the inside. Nicodemus wants to walk the trail into the mysterious forest that is God.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus secretly, under the cover of darkness, to say, “You come from God. Everyone can see that. I want to know God, too; I want to really know God. I want God in my life. But how do I begin? In other words, “where does the trail start?”

However Jesus responds to Nicodemus, but he doesn't seem to get what Jesus is talking about. Jesus said, “Nicodemus, You don't need God to come into your life. That's backwards. You need to come into God's life. God doesn't come into your life. It works the other way. God offers us God's own life as a gift and beckons us to enter it. You need to be in the life of God. In fact, Nicodemus, you need to be born all over again, this time born into God's life.”

“I don't know how to do that,” said Nicodemus. “I don't know how to be born all over again into the life of God.”

And Jesus said, “I know you don't know. Well, there is good news for you, Nicodemus. The life of God is not far away from you. The life of God has come near to you. Indeed, the life of God is sitting right next to you, speaking to you now.” The love that binds all three parts of God together has spilled out into the world in Jesus. God so loved the world that God has given God's only Son...given a Son not to condemn the world but to save it...given a Son as a way into the fullness of the life of God.

So, if you are looking for a good place to start, Jesus is where the trail starts, the trail that leads us into the joyful and loving life of God.

In the last week, I've been thinking about the Trinity, not as a theological ideal, but as a way to experience God as deeply historical, personal, and rooted in community. It's a community geared toward the future.

The Trinity helps us to imagine what the Kingdom of God is. It's the lens through which we gaze. It is how we think about the interconnectedness and the relationship of the Holy and the holiest things.³

For me, God is deeply historical, and God is constant. God has been the same forever. God is consistent in the event of Jesus Christ and God is always looking forward to being rooted in community.

As we seek to be followers of Jesus, we have to ask more than what the 1990s wrist band says, "What would Jesus do?" We are drawn into the communion with the fullness of God's life. We are baptized into the whole life of Christ, life death and resurrection. To belong to Christ, is to belong to his whole family, to be drawn through Jesus the Son into a deep and loving relationship with God, the Parent in the power of the Spirit.

There's a baptism story I've heard. Once a minister was baptizing a two year old boy. After the child has been baptized with water the minister, puts his hand on the little boy's head and addresses him with the familiar Trinitarian language. He said, "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism and you belong to Jesus Christ forever." Well, unexpectedly, the little boy looked up and responded, "Uh-oh!"⁴

The parents chuckled, the congregation smiled, and the minister reflected that it was an appropriate response.... “a stunning theological affirmation” from the mouth of a child. That “uh-oh” was the recognition that everything had changed, this boy would never be the same.

It's hard for parents to believe at that moment that their son didn't belong just to his biological family; but that he now had been born all over again, into God's Trinitarian family. Now he would be called to live out in the world the kind of love and self-giving that goes on among the three in the Trinity (Parent, Child, Spirit)

I like to think Jesus also entrusted these teachings to Nicodemus because he saw his potential. Nicodemus knows the Father, the Creator God, the one and true God of Israel, who sustained and delivered the Israelites, whose dwelling is the Holy Temple. But to Jesus, there are two things that Nicodemus still needs: to know the Son and to receive the Spirit, in whom God comes close. What Jesus offers Nicodemus is an invitation to know God's other dimensions more deeply: to experience inner renewal through the Spirit, and to build a relationship with God through Jesus.

Jesus's invitation upends everything Nicodemus knows and believes. It is an “Uh-oh” moment for Nicodemus, one that would open his understanding and deepen his faith. We will see Nicodemus again. When the Sanhedrin is trying to decide what to do about Jesus, Nicodemus pleads with the others to give the man a fair trial (John 7). The second time we see Nicodemus is when he joins Joseph of Arimathea to prepare and anoint Jesus' body for burial (John 19:38ff). We don't really know the intention, was it reverential or worshipful? Was he sad at the death of a great teacher, or had he been changed

through is encounter with Jesus and therefore saw a bit more clearly the Kingdom of God.

I find Nicodemus's story powerful. Not easy. Devoid of a clear ending. But powerful.

And his story is a story for all of us whose walks of faith seem to contain more questions than answers. For all of us who spend more time than we would care to admit wrestling with our faith. For all of us who stare up at the darkened sky at night and wonder how God sent God's very own self, into this tattered world to make it whole.

It is also a story for those of us who come to Jesus in the nighttimes of our lives, who come to Jesus in the shadowy darkness, yet who say to Jesus, along with the disciples: to whom else could we go?

And yet wherever we are this morning, whether in the darkness or in the light, Jesus shares with us the same powerful words. Here is what he says, one more time, because it can't be said enough:

God loved the world so much that God gave God's only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. This Son, Jesus Christ, opens his arms wide to welcome us into the very life of God. The trail into God's own life starts here.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Steven Richards-Price, “Excuse Me, Where Does the Trail Start?” Interpretation Journal, 16/2 (Autumn, 2011), 25-26.

² Day1.org; Tom Long sermon, The Start of the Trail. The inspiration for the sermon came from Tom Long’s contribution. I have borrowed from his ideas.

³ Sermon Brainwave Podcast, Luther Seminary May 24, 2021.

⁴ John Buchanan, “Beginnings and Endings,” The Christian Century, Jan 25, 2012.