



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

DO YOU BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD

Sermon for Trinity Sunday, May 22, 2016

Readings: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

Sermon text: Jesus said to the disciples, “I still have many things to say to you but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all the truth.” John 16:13

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? Proverbs 8:1

This the third of three sermons on the Trinity and the Creeds.

Jesus said to his disciples, “I still have many things to say to you but you cannot bear them now.”

I am reminded of a line from “Burnet Norton,” the first part of T.S. Eliot’s long poem, *The Four Quartets* (Rowan Williams has called *The Four Quartets* the greatest Christian poem of the twentieth century): “Humankind cannot bear very much reality.”

One reason is that we—humankind—are prone to distraction— indeed we are “distracted from distraction by distraction.” Ever more so in the flood of image and information in this digital age. But “does not Wisdom call” even now? Isn’t Understanding raising her voice, straining to be heard in the din of the marketplace? Yes. But do you hear it? Will you take the time to listen and learn?

I have talked in the past two sermons about God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. God the Father—God above us—transcendent, unknowable, the creator of the universe. God the Spirit,—God within us—immanent, the giver of life, the guide of reason and conscience, the call to worship and follow. Now, on this occasion—Trinity Sunday and the baptism of Addison Annette Maggiocomo—it is time to talk about Jesus. But I have found it difficult to figure out what to say. I wrote one sermon on the cosmic Christ—God from God, light from light, true God from true God, of one Being with the Father, through whom all things are made ((Nicene Creed) and in whom all things cohere (Colossians 1), the Logos or Word of God (John 1), the Alpha and Omega (Revelation 1). Too long and complicated—and where is the part about Christ being God with us?

Jesus, God with us and for us, beside us on the journey. Not God transcendent or immanent, but incarnate. The face of God in human form—and whose face we continue to see with the eyes of faith as we look at others, and especially those in need. Where is the Jesus who calls us to follow him?

That is the Jesus I have come to know—through following. And so I threw out the first two sermons and decided to tell my story, again. Some of you know it—for it happened here—when I first became a member of Grace on the occasion of the baptism of my son Eli, now 26 years old.

At the time, twenty years ago, I wasn't a Christian—not really. I had been baptized and confirmed in the Episcopal Church, I had done my duty as an acolyte. But when I was on my own I left the church. I wandered the world and studied different philosophies and religions. I learned to be a carpenter and designed and built a house in Lagrangeville—and Mary and I started our family. Emma, our first child was born prematurely and died within a few days. My father died six weeks later—and so did his mother. I was angry and sad. Confused—how did this happen, why? If there is a God who decides who lives and dies, what kind of God lets small children die—the whole problem of evil and suffering. If there is no God, what then? Just get over it? What do I do with my anger and grief?

Then Eli was born two years later. I wanted to give thanks and pray for his health and happiness. To whom? Then the question came up: should we baptize Eli? We visited Grace one Sunday morning. Then Rector, Ken Swanson, asked if we wanted to baptize Eli. I said, not so fast. Let me read this Baptismal Covenant. I am not sure I can take these vows to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in good faith. Let me take some time to study and think.

So I did. I read a bunch of books on Christianity. I talked regularly with Ken. It started to make sense on a head level, though I was by no means sure I believed in the divinity of Christ: the virgin birth (how did he get a Y chromosome?), the resurrection from the dead, the ascension into heaven (like a rocket into space?). I had trouble—and who doesn't—mapping the ancient language and pictures onto my scientific worldview. But I liked the idea of God with us, Emmanuel. God becoming human and walking the human way of life and death, joy and suffering. And coming through it—that this mortal life is not the only chapter in the book. For that would not be enough for those with a very short or terrible life. But if God knew all that—through personal experience, through laughter and tears. Well, I could follow such a person—for Jesus was such a person, admirable in every way—trustworthy, inspiring, worthy of being followed as a teacher and guide. And so I did commit myself to becoming a follower of Christ as we baptized Eli.

And I quickly realized there is more to this way than getting a new worldview. You also have to serve people in need and learn to pray, have a personal relationship with God. Whoa. The first part was easy. I was a carpenter, I joined a chapter of Habitat for Humanity and helped build affordable decent housing for someone who needed a hand. But the prayer part...I had grown up reciting prayers from the Prayer Book. That's not enough. But how do you do it?

A lay person at Grace, Chris Hunter, now Gerbi, invited me to join her prayer group, which met around her kitchen table. A glass of wine, some small talk, and then she opened with prayer. Chris stuttered normally—but when she prayed it was mellifluous. It was powerful. There was palpable sense of the Holy Spirit in the room. One time as I was listening and concentrating, a picture came into my head of a flourishing tree spreading out over a field. I spoke this image into the group—people said amen. There was prayer there.

I wanted to connect with God in prayer regularly. How? Well, at the time I smoked cigarettes and wanted to quit. But it was hard. I would usually smoke between tasks on the job. So, instead of having a cigarette during those few minutes between, I tried to pray. Hello Jesus—it's me, Matt. Checking in. I am saying a prayer for my family and friends, for the people caught in that earthquake in China, a couple of other things. Maybe a personal request. It was talking in the phone to someone who never answered back. I never felt or heard anything in direct response. But I did quit smoking.

I learned about the Jesus Prayer—a prayer in the eastern Orthodox tradition: “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Tune with breathing, and repeat. And repeat—a kind of mantra. It really works to calm you—like meditation or centering prayer. Good for driving, to keep your mind clear, or doing routine tasks like painting or sanding. Avoid when using power tool. We know now that there are many forms of practice that increase mindfulness, calm and the ability to act rather than react to the world whirling in constant motion around us. We have learned much from the eastern traditions such as yoga and tai chi here, but the Christian tradition has wonderful prayer practices too. But I never heard about them growing up.

One such practice is that of spiritual direction. Ken was a master spiritual director. He led me through a series of exercises in which I would set aside a half-hour to forty minutes in the morning, get centered, and then invite the Holy Spirit to show me myself: one week on each of the seven deadly sins (greed, lust pride...), another seven weeks on various relationships (parents, spouse, children, friends, work...), and a final seven week on the gifts of the Holy Spirit (love, patience, joy...). It was intense but life-changing. I went to seminary and here I am.

I continue to work on my prayer life—getting better at recognizing that still small voice of the Spirit, the call of Jesus to follow, the movement of my own spirit and life. I am not someone who has regular visions of God or hears a discernible voice inside. Some, perhaps many, do have powerful mystical encounters with the living God—and I think I can count a number myself, even if not overwhelming. But somehow the practice of prayer helps get me closer to Jesus in smaller, more subtle ways. I also commend the study of scripture, especially the gospels. There I find myself learning more each time I read the familiar stories. I get better at picturing the face and way of Jesus, not just as a historical figure but as a living person who speaks through daily life and appears in many faces.

The Word of God. The Son of God. This is the one I chose to follow—and who I continue to choose every day. My Lord and Savior—for he leads me into life and saves me from just following my own desires and distractions, and not fully encountering the deep reality of life—that there is a purpose, a joy, a meaning, call it eternal life—within this mortal life.

I hope my story resonates with yours—for we each have one. We each are on a journey from and to God. I hope the story of how I came to more deeply believe in the presence and divinity of Jesus helps you affirm your baptismal vows. We follow a great teacher and guide—for we follow who one is God with us. How great is that?

Amen.

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