

sermon-5/30/10 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Reflections on the Trinity
Rom. 5:1-5

This is Trinity Sunday, not one of my favorite Sundays in terms of preaching. How does one explain the Trinity? That feels like a pretty dry discussion! Such a theological topic is not that pressing an issue for most in the Church these days.

The lectionary is often not a help here. Usually those picking the scriptures for Trinity Sunday give us passages that mention God, Jesus and the Spirit in the same text. They can't give us a passage that mentions the word "Trinity" because it is not in the Bible. Neither Jesus, or any New Testament author, mentions the word "Trinity."

This year one of the lectionary passages is in Paul's letter to the Romans. This little passage actually has a couple of other trinities, so to speak. It might be more accurate to call them triads. I am referring to the past, present, and future as one triad, and faith, hope and love as the other. I'd like us to think about what we normally refer to as the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer) through the lens of these other trinities.

The thing about the past is that it can rear its ugly head and mess up the present. Most of us carry the past with us. It can be filled with nostalgia for the way things used to be. It could be a longing for our lost youth and past glories. Sadly, often the past brings the scars of disappointments, uneven parenting in our childhood, and worse into the present causing us to limp our way through our days.

The past, for Paul, includes the time before his contemporaries knew God's love in Christ. It was the time before grace offered them a place to stand. That's the phrase Paul uses in Romans five. Isn't that a nice image? Grace is the foundation upon which we stand. Without grace we would stumble and fall.

A member of the lectionary class pointed out Frederick Buechner's definition of grace in his wonderful book *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. Here is part of what he wrote: "Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

"A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. . .The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. . .There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it."

Any who try to sustain their lives solely by their own efforts understand what a shaky foundation that is. We are far from perfect. If being whole depended on our never

making a mistake, we would not have a leg to stand on. But, Paul says, now, in the present, those who have faith stand on grace.

The present, however, is a very allusive reality. It is always the present, but it is hard to live in the present without the past clinging to us and hampering our ability to enter into the present fully. The present is a gift. For Paul, the present is enriched by God's grace giving us not only a place to stand, but a glimpse of our salvation as well. We know we are saved, made whole, healed, however you want to phrase that, by God's grace. But, we only experience that salvation partially in the present. We long for its full realization, for that time when all that is broken in our lives and the world will be healed.

That time for salvation to be fully realized is the future. Commentators say that for Paul, Christians primarily belong to the future. The future is not something to fear because we have been assured by God's Spirit that our future is ultimately in God's loving embrace.

Therefore we are not weighed down by the past, or our ambiguous present reality. We are not defined, at least not completely defined, by all that has gone before, or is going on now. It is God's future that defines our present.

Closely related to the past, present, and future triad is perhaps Paul's favorite trinity: faith, hope and love. We see it here in Romans five, and most familiarly in I Cor. 13 where Paul says, "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

It is this trinity that dominates our passage in Romans. It begins with faith. Faith, perhaps better understood as trust, is what allows us to have a relationship with that holy mystery we call God. When we trust that at the very center of creation is a reality that is luring us to be whole, we can know peace.

Another name for this reality is love. I John says "God is love." This is no sentimental emotion. I came across an article that described how the famous Scottish preacher, George MacDonald, understood love. He says love is God's essential being and that love is like a fire. The interesting thing about this fire is that it burns only at a distance. MacDonald says "the farther away from God we are, the more terrible this fire burns us; and the closer we draw to God, the more the burning begins to change to comfort."

Is that not an intriguing notion of God's love? Love is a kind of judgment when we pull away from God, but it becomes a warming comfort the closer we draw near to God. That is a far more helpful image for me than being judged in the fires of hell!

While Paul, in First Corinthians, says love is the greatest, the crown of this triad in Romans five is hope. Paul talks about a process that ends in hope. The process begins with suffering, moves to endurance, then to character, and ends in hope.

It would appear that Paul seems to be glorifying suffering here. Why else would he say we boast in our suffering? That sounds pretty masochistic to my ears. One commentator

helps us understand what Paul means by boast. He writes to boast is to identify things that give our life value and worth.

For Paul, this process in the journey of faith that inevitably involves some suffering (who has not suffered?) leads to our becoming whole. Another scholar says suffering, in this sense, is like the birth pangs women go through. While pain is not something those giving birth long to experience, it does end in the joy of new birth. So too does suffering in our walk of faith lead to hope.

Any significant journey, and especially the journey of faith, is not easy. Pain is part of any serious relationship. Parents know this in their parenting. Spouses and partners know this in their marriages. It is true in any significant friendship as well. We can boast in that pain because those relationships give our life value and worth. Ultimately any suffering we go through in our relationship with God, as experienced in our other relationships, will lead to hope.

Moltmann, one of the great theologians of the twentieth century, defined hope as the “creative passion for the possible.” Another commentator says that hope is not so much about the future as it is a deep sense that the present is God-filled. This allows us to move into the future without fear.

That’s a lot to chew on this Trinity Sunday. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; past, present, and future; or faith, love, and hope are all triads rich in meaning and mystery. May our experience of God be a Trinitarian experience. May it lead to being whole. May we not be afraid of the spiritual journey, even when it involves suffering. Amen