

“The Intimate, Personal, Triune God”
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
June 7, 2009 – Trinity Sunday
And Based on John 3:1-17
By the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

What do you suppose the Trinity talks about when they get together? Does the Father say, “How was your day today, Son? Did you do something useful?” Does the Son say, “Did you see the neighbors are putting in a fish pond? I’ve always wanted a fish pond....”

This, of course, is much too prosaic. It’s even a bit “taking the Lord’s name in vain.” Perhaps, then, what they talk about is the law. “The Seventh Commandment, I’ve been getting a lot mail about it. Too hard to live up to, they say. What do you think? Ease up a bit?” Or maybe “I’ve been thinking about instituting a No Parking This Side of the Street ban in heaven. What do you think? The traffic! We’ve got to do something!”

But this won’t do, either. It, too, trivializes the whole thing too much. And besides, if all they did talk about was current and pending legislation, they would be policy wonks, and that can’t be right. Surely the Father and the Son have better things to talk about. (I’m not sure what the Holy Spirit contributes. I don’t picture the Spirit talking at all, just giving nudges....)

I put a reproduction of a famous Russian icon on the cover of your bulletin, plus extensive notes about it on the back two pages. It is Andrei Rublev’s “The Holy Trinity.” Painted early in the 15th century, it depicts three angels seated around a table. They are the three men in Genesis 18 who pay Abraham a visit while on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah. They are clearly more than three men, however, for one of them announces the destruction he is going to rain down on the two cities. He also prophesies to Abraham that his wife will give birth to a son. Icon painters used this story to portray the Trinity without violating the Second Commandment, the prohibition against making graven images. Andrei Rublev painted the three conversing about the eucharist—communion, that is. The middle angel represents God the Father. He is pointing to the communion cup, a symbol of the sacrifice Christ is going to make. Christ, on the left, agrees to take this cup—to *be* this cup, poured out for the salvation of humankind. The Holy Spirit on the right, also known as the Comforter, offers comfort.

This is an attractive option. It has the advantage of being elevated. The Trinity is talking about something important, something in the nature of what they do. But it has the disadvantage of being didactic, of teaching us a lesson about who they are rather than offering us a true portrait of their inner life. Maybe, then, we’ve come to the end of what it is possible to know. Maybe if the truth were known, we would have to admit that we may never know what they’re talking about because it’s behind closed doors. It’s a family affair, in other words, which

is to say their conversation is private and not public, and therefore off limits to our prying ears.

Well! This isn't quite what we expected. I mean, it sounds plausible that they should have a right to privacy, but really! At our expense? Didn't Christ die for us? And if so, shouldn't we be privy to everything he says?

It turns out that this is true: we should be privy to everything he says, and indeed, we are privy to it, for it is all there in the Scriptures, plain to see for anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear. But to demand this as a right misses the point. It is not that we have a right to hear what is being said between the Father and the Son, but that we *may* hear what they are saying, at *their* invitation, and not only hear it, but take part in it as well. Their conversation is a family affair, and it is behind closed doors, but Jesus assures us that it is also open to whomever he names a friend. "You are my friends," he said (John 15:14-15), "if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."

"I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father"—now that is open access, is it not?

But it is not FaceBook blabbing it about, much less Twitter fodder for twittering feeders. The conversation is still private, even though it is open to many, for it is about holy things. It is in the end about love. This is what Nicodemus in our gospel lesson for today could not grasp. Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, came to Jesus by night to hear what he had to say. You would think this considerable effort on his part would have earned him a privileged seat at the table. But that is not what happened. Nicodemus had yet to learn how to listen. "You must be born from above," Jesus told him. You must be exquisitely attentive to what the Spirit is saying and doing. No perception of the Spirit, no comprehending and therefore, no hearing, either, of what God is about. "You must be born from above."

"How can these things be?" Nicodemus said to Jesus, and his obtuseness rings through the centuries. How could he fail to grasp this elemental point? What is so hard about "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit"? Had he no concept whatsoever of things spiritual, of things having spirit, not to mention the Holy Spirit?

I think his failure to grasp this stemmed from the inner turmoil he experienced in his own life. I think Nicodemus was short on the personal integrity that comes when your private life is secure and not subject to prying eyes and ears. He came to Jesus by night, you see, which means that he was embarrassed by his need to hear more. He did not want to be seen by his neighbors. In truth, he lived for their opinion of him. He was a leader of the Jews, but he was wholly dependent upon their good opinion of him for that leadership. His strength did not come from within. It came from without, from the public face he showed to others. Inside, he heard what the Spirit was saying—"Rabbi, we know that you are a

teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God”—but that knowledge flew in the face of his conviction that his future lay with his admirers. He could not resolve this dichotomy.

And therefore, it is not clear what happened to him. Later on, when Jesus attended the Festival of Booths in Jerusalem—this is in chapter 7 of the gospel of John—the temple police were sent to arrest him. But he stirred up the crowds with his proclamations. “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water’ (7:37-38), and the police never carried out their orders. “Why not?” they were asked back at headquarters. “Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?” Deafening silence, although Nicodemus’s heart was pounding. “But this crowd,” the temple authorities went on, “which does not know the law—they are accursed!” At which point Nicodemus stepped forward. “Our law does not judge people,” he said, “without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?”—Nicodemus’s faint plea to be heard, to *hear*, and with that, just maybe, to enter into the life of the intimate, personal, triune God.

But it fell on deaf ears. “Surely you are not from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.” End of conversation.

It takes the courage of one’s inner convictions to withstand the pressure of one’s public commitments. They are not unrelated, but it is also true that the personal and the private is not dependent upon the impersonal and the peripheral. In someone in whom there is no guile, whose integrity is intact, and who is not subject to the opinions of his or her neighbors, that sense of wholeness, that integrity, that inner peace, that *shalom* comes from God, from taking part in the inner life of God.

It is open to all, if we have the courage of our convictions to confess it.
May we have that courage.

Thanks be to God who has given us this victory in our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.