

## Trinity Sunday

Today we celebrate the mystery of the Trinity, this strange, even incomprehensible notion that in one God there are three persons, yet one God.

And far too often, we preachers try to talk about the Trinity in ways you might visualize in your mind's eye.

So we say, the Trinity is like a mango: peel, fruit and seed, yet all one mango.

Or, its like Neapolitan ice cream: chocolate, vanilla and strawberry, yet making one ice cream cone.

But these analogies really don't get us very far; because the Trinity isn't a thing, it's a relationship – of unconditional love.

The boy was 15 when it happened.\*

His dad, dean of an Episcopal college, is a rather big, sometimes gruff man who always has a lot on his mind.

The school has a baseball field with expensive, high intensity lights for night ball; and the boy loves to throw rocks up at the lights.

Oh, the lights are too high to hit, it's just the challenge of the throw that keeps the boy at it; until the day his dad catches him, yells at him, warns him to stop.

Which he does, for a awhile.

Then he starts again, and one fine morning, with his friends standing around, he launches a rock that, as soon as it leaves his hand, he knows it is the perfect throw.

It goes higher than any rock he ever threw, so high it grazes one of those pricey lights, and it breaks, scattering glass all over the field.

The boy is mortified and warns his friends not to say a word, and the boy vows never to let his dad know what he did.

Except that as the weeks wear on, the secret eats at the boy.

When his dad jokes with him, the boy begins to feel angry, because of his shame, because of his secret.

He withdraws from his family, gets mad at the slightest tease, and he is miserable.

When the misery reaches a point where he can't bear it any longer, he decides to own up to his dad, and drags himself to his dad's office at the school, knocks softly, and when the booming voice from behind the large desk says to come in, he complies.

Head down, stammering, he confesses, waiting for the stinging words of rebuke, for the months of being grounded.

Instead, his dad stands up, and hugs him — tight - real tight - and the boy collapses in tears.

And the boy is changed, forever.

I'm wondering if this kind of experience, this kind of feeling, isn't this what's at the root of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus today?

Nicodemus, a scholar and a religious leader who certainly knows and keeps the rules, he certainly knows and keeps the law, but strangely, when it comes to the true nature of God, he is clueless.

Clueless, yet totally curious about Jesus.

Curious enough to switch off the late news on TV, to head out into the midnight air to track Jesus down, where they might chat, away from the suspicious eyes of the holy rollers, of the other religious big shots.

After all, the stories about changing all that water into wine, healing the fellow born blind, telling the lame man to walk, (and lo and behold, he walks!), why, word gets around and Nicodemus is wondering...

Then there's that mess just a few days ago, what with Jesus tossing all the pay day lenders and pawn shop owners out of the Temple, causing quite a stir.

So here's Nicodemus, an honorable and sincere man, who is dumbfounded when Jesus tells him, in so many words, that — as we are, we cannot encounter God.

It's a tough thing to swallow, so I'll say it again.

As we are, we cannot encounter God.

It's not only Jesus saying it.

Isaiah and Paul say it too.

Something has to change — a hot coal, says Isaiah; exchanging flesh for an invasion of the spirit, says Paul; a new birth, says Jesus.

And there's something else that's a shocker, especially for us modern, go it alone, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps people — Isaiah's hot coal, Paul's invasion of the spirit, Jesus' new birth, these aren't things **we** do, these are things **that are done to us!**

Like a dad's unexpected embrace - when we expected a beating.

Which is why Jesus, as usual, hits the nail on the head!

Think about what's going on when someone is being born ... it means ... **someone else** is giving birth!

From what I've seen, the one being born isn't doing much, the one giving birth is doing all the hard work!

Now, I've never given birth, and I'm quite sure that if men had the babies, the human race would have died out after the first generation.

But I've been around a few births, and from the outside looking in — it's a messy business.

When a mom is in labor, sweet manners and sweet talk fly out the window.

Instead, what seems to be happening is a glorious agony of sweat and tears and bodily fluids and pain and effort and well, many of you sitting here know all about it from being there, and you don't need to hear more from me.

But here's the point.

We so often think of God as something like that uptight dad sitting behind his desk at the Episcopal college, who at least appears to be all prim and proper — not someone we want mad at us.

And Jesus says, that's not what God is like!

Jesus insists that God is more like a woman in labor; laboring to give birth to people who are struggling to emerge into that which we were always intended to become.

This idea of God giving birth to us isn't new with Jesus.

It's all over the Bible!

It's just that when we get all dressed up in our Sunday best, many folks would rather hear about the rules rather than risk getting soaked in the afterbirth of the Holy Spirit.

So how might all of this inform our faith?

How might it change what we think when we think about God?

There's a Hebrew word for "womb" that is also used to speak of God's compassion, forgiveness and kindness.

So imagine, if you will, that God is, every moment of every day, giving birth to humanity from a place of compassion, forgiveness and kindness, and that God has been doing this ever since humanity first stepped foot out of Africa!

What a take on God, eh?

How different from some stoic old man sitting outside of time, unmoved by our problems.

There's another Hebrew word for "pain in childbearing" – it gets translated into English as "grieve."

Which is what God does when our first parents leave the garden, having decided they are equipped to know the difference between good and evil all by themselves.

It's what God does when the Jewish people, when we, put faith in machines of war and pension plans – rather than in the steadfast love of God.

God grieves.

God labors for us. Debbie Blue, *Sensual Orthodoxy*, 35-8, paraphrased.

So maybe what Jesus is saying is that unless we will throw caution to the winds and slide down the slippery hill of God's boundless desire to have us all, unless we are willing to take a chance on God, to knock on his door and stand before him with whatever regrets we may have, then we too, like Nicodemus, might just miss out on the indescribable joy that comes from being loved just as we are, for who we are, no matter what we've done!

And maybe that's why the early church mothers and fathers give us this strange notion that one God is three, that three are one.....

We can't see it, we can only feel it.

Just like the wind, just like hope, just like love.

+amen

\*based on *The Manger is Empty*, W. Wangerin, Jr, modified.