

FCC Ascension Sermon, 5-16-21

Way far back, in the shadows of Chartres Cathedral in France, there is a lovely, odd little stone bas relief of Jesus' Ascension. I didn't find it on my own, I went looking for it after reading about it in a daily devotional, but all those in my little labyrinth pilgrimage group fell in love with it!

The sculpture shows the disciples standing around looking up with their mouths open while a pair of cute little feet are just disappearing into the cloud at the top of the frame. Jesus, ascending to heaven. The unknown artist captures so well the look of dismay as, I imagine, the disciples wonder what could possibly come next. They had just asked Him if this was the time for Him to restore the kingdom to Israel, and he gave them a typical Jesus-y answer. Basically, "none of your business", but the Holy Spirit will come upon you and show you the way forward. Probably not all that reassuring to the disciples.

Also probably part of the reason Jesus feels he needs to put in an extra prayer for them, as he does in the reading from John's Gospel asking God to protect them after he is gone. They are just SO clueless.

The disciples had their own ideas about what should happen next, and Jesus wasn't having it. After all the time they had spent with Jesus, they still expected a worldly kingdom to be restored to Israel, with the Romans kicked out and a righteous, Jewish, Torah-based rule in their place. Instead Jesus tells them to get on the road, head out to the ends of the earth and spread my message of justice and reconciliation everywhere you go.

The Chartres sculptor doesn't show the men in white robes described in our reading for today from Acts, who said to the disciples, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." In other words, move on, get busy, he left you work to do, so go do it! Close your mouths, put on your walking shoes and hit the road.

Jesus set the disciples straight about their mission, and we would do well to listen and hear what He said. Going out to the ends of the earth to spread His word didn't mean going out to make everyone Christian. He didn't even know that "Christian" would be a thing. He

sent them out to spread the word of release to the captives, and to bring about the message of Matthew 25; to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, visit those in prison, care for the sick, clothe the naked and welcome the stranger. So how are WE doing with those tasks? Or are we wasting our time whining about the persecution of Christians?

Oddly enough, this country is in a place right now where big-time, extremely conservative so-called Christians are stridently calling for a return to the Christian nation that we were supposedly designed to be. Except that we weren't. John Adams had this to say: *"The government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion."* The other founding fathers agreed. They carefully and deliberately left out any mention of Christianity, even of God. This country was founded as a purely secular one, because some wise men recognized the evil that could be done in the name of religion.

We make God so small when we try to confine God to any one religion, and I believe Jesus understood that. However, it doesn't always appear as though the Gospel

writers get it. Especially the writer of the Gospel of John.

He is SO angry at “The Jews”, blaming them for everything bad that has happened. In the passage we read today, it is clear that, according to John, Jesus’ message and indeed eventual salvation are ONLY for those who follow Jesus. Do we really think this narrowness would be Jesus’ idea? I don’t. I think this is the work of a deeply believing Jewish man who is angry, feeling rejected and lashing out at those who have pushed his group of believers out of the synagogues. This is the writer of John sticking out his tongue at his fellow Jews and saying, “See, WE are going to have eternal life and you aren’t. So there!”.

Jesus came into this world for everyone. If we look at the beginning of the Gospel of John, at those beautiful words, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God”, we see that the Word was the creative power of God, present with God before and during the Creation, whatever that means to you. That Word of God was there for everyone; called by different names, worshipped in

many ways by many different religions. Jesus is just OUR name for the Word of God.

The Gospel of John also talks about oneness a lot. In this specific passage, Jesus is said to pray, “that they may be one, as we are one”. Meaning that His followers may be one with God, with Jesus and with each other. If we believe that this passage also concerns us, and we SHOULD, then we are also to be one with God, with Jesus and with one another. Well, oneness with God doesn’t seem all that hard, at least some of the time, if you are like me. We pray, we listen, we sit in stillness, we, at least occasionally, feel God’s presence.

Being one with Jesus also seems fairly easy. I believe that somehow, in a way that I wouldn’t dream of trying to describe, Jesus IS the divinity, the divine spark that lives in each one of us. So we are one with Jesus without even trying; all we have to do is accept it, breathe it in.

But being one with each other? Now that’s hard! In John’s day, when there barely WAS Christianity, groups were already arguing. They argued about many of the same things we still argue about; who is saved and who is not, who is welcome at the table, how baptism should

be done, which spiritual gifts were better than others, who could preach, who should lead, you name it, they argued. And as the years went on, the arguments only got louder and more contentious. And...most of those arguments never really got resolved, despite the many Councils in the 300-500's.

I don't know if any of you are fans of the comic Emo Phillips; I don't even know if he is around anymore. But one of his best-known jokes is this:

"Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too!

What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern

Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "You Heretic!" And I pushed him over."

Well, we may not be quite that bad, but not all that far off sometimes. I tried to find a comprehensive list or chart of denominations and the best I could find was a chart of MAJOR denominations. It had 39 boxes, and I could already see that three of the groups that made up MY denomination, United Church of Christ, were missing. So, not all that useful, except for pointing out how complicated the whole thing is! There are probably many hundreds of denominations, and the list is only growing.

So maybe the answer is that the Holy Spirit, the one Jesus and the writer of John call the Advocate, is the one who can weave us all together. Who can pull together the pieces of the broken truth we all hold a fragment of until we ARE all one. Maybe, just maybe, what we believe doesn't actually matter nearly as much

as what we do. Maybe orthodoxy, right beliefs, is much less important than orthopraxy, what we practice, especially in our ethical practices.

Okay, so now let's talk about the Trinity. Are you ready? Hold tight! Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Choose your favorite triad. One of my mentors, the pastor of our old home church back in Natick, was fond of saying that there really aren't many Trinitarians in the pews. They are mostly Unitarians who just don't realize it. Even in those churches where the Nicene Creed is said most Sundays, I'm not sure most of those who say it pay much attention to the words.

The concept of Trinity is just too hard. Three persons in one? How can that be? How can we declare one true God, if we give that God three names? I had a hard time with Trinitarianism for a long time.

What helped me was this. First, the word Trinity is NOT in the Bible. The idea, sort-of, but not the word. So, the "three persons" of the Trinity is early church language, written originally in Latin. When we talk in church these days about the three persons of the

Trinity, like God is three different people, that's really just a mistranslation.

In Latin, it was “personae”, and that should be translated as masks, or, if we don't like that, aspects. One being, three ways of looking at that being.

The core of my theology has always been relationship and Communion, both the sharing of the bread and cup and the communion of simply being with others with whom you ARE in relationship. The importance of having people in your life who can support you when life has knocked you down. Yes, we should put our faith in God, but I believe that God most often works by sending us the people we need.

The concept that finally brought Trinity into focus for me was an ancient one, from 8th century writing by church fathers. And it is, in Greek, “perichoresis”, meaning, roughly, a circle dance. The three personae of the Trinity, whatever you call them, are in constant flow, in relationship. Sometimes one aspect shows more clearly, sometimes another, but always there is movement, there is dance.

Of course, it is dangerous to try to describe a mystery, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try, so long

as we remember that any description will be woefully inadequate. Bearing that in mind, I'm going to suggest the analogy of looking at ourselves as made up of body, mind and soul. At times, any of these can describe what we are, mostly by what we DO, but woven together as a whole, complete person.

I think we can do the same for the Trinity. When we look at the static universe, we see the work of the One who created it. When we look inside, we see and feel the One who lives there, an integral part of us. And surrounding us, animating the world, the energy and vibrations of the Holy Spirit, drawing us into the dance. Three ways of looking at one beautiful whole.

Our job is to realize that we ARE part of the dance. That we all have a part to play, a way to harmonize with the universe.

That same mentor back in Natick had a daughter who played the cello. Her teacher also played in a small group of classical musicians. However, they didn't just play the pieces as written. They also improvised, the way jazz is improvised. When Vicky asked how that was even possible, he said, "I play the part I don't hear". "I play the part I don't hear". I can't actually figure out

how that works in playing music, but I think it describes the way we could all find and play our part in the divine dance. Trusting the Holy Spirit to show us where we fit perfectly, making the pattern whole and complete.

Perhaps the bleakest book I have ever read is Cormac McCarthy's book, "The Road". In a world where some unnamed apocalypse has all but destroyed all vegetation and wildlife and most of the few remaining people have gone feral, a father and son travel a road searching for other people who still retain some humanity. In this place with almost no hope, there is just a hint of hope in the love this father and son bear one another and in the quest they are on.

Periodically, the son will say to his father, "We carry the fire, don't we?" And the answer is, "Yes, we do, we carry the fire." This phrase is never really explained, but it is obvious that they are searching for relationship and communion, seeking to join with others who also carry the fire, the divine spark.

Human beings are designed to be in relationship. And that's a hard thing these days. This world, at least the modern, Western world, tells us we should be independent, relying on no-one but ourselves, in

competition with most everyone we meet. But God, that divine spark that lives within us, or maybe the whispers of the Holy Spirit, tells us that we have a job to do, just like the disciples did 2,000 years ago. Our job is also to carry Jesus message to the ends of the earth, to wake up others to the divine spark that lives in them, to draw others into the dance.

Because we carry the fire.

Amen.