Sermon on Trinity Sunday 2021
(Isaiah 6:1-8, Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17)

Inevitably, or so it can feel at the time—when someone we believe in, someone we have put our hope in, maybe have come to love, acts in way towards us that disappoints, perhaps this disappointment is our misunderstanding, or actual hurtful action; regardless, we say bitterly: “it’s always about them.”

This can happen to us enough of the time that it can be hard to give ourselves in the unreserved way we want to, even with close family and friends.

This can also be part of the reason why we can live in a kind of defensive posture towards God; we project onto God our human experience of relationships.

But the Gospel, we remind ourselves, God’s Good News, the truly amazing thing that is really hard to comprehend about God is that for God it’s never about God, it’s always, perennially, passionately and fully about…us! About human beings and the creation we’ve been called to inhabit, enjoy, protect and fulfill.

Why this is so, why God is love, why God loves the world, why God loves us, why, especially, does God love me, this is the true mystery.

We may think the mystery is the title of this date on the Christian calendar: the Feast of the Holy Trinity, 1 is 3, 3 is 1 but it isn’t. Holy Trinity is a mere descriptor, our best, but still fumbling attempt to describe our experience of being apprehended, confronted and humbled by the mystery that God loves completely and fully, without reserve.

Our attempts to define, to map out God, important though they may be, helpful as they have been to me on my own life’s quest are really all about trying to understand “how” this Love comes to us, they can never get at the “why.”

The best we can do is imitated for us by Nicodemus. He’s open to learn, he’s gone on the clandestine adventure of meeting Jesus by night *(by the way, the best way to approach God is not by trying to be proper but by imagining a clandestine adventure like climbing out of your bedroom window at night to go meet your buddies around the campfire down by the gravel pit 😊*)

When he meets up with Jesus he says, “We know you are a teacher who has come from God” to which Jesus replies unhelpfully, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born *anothen*, which means either “born from above” or “born again.”

After getting deeper into the mystical weeds, Nicodemus’ exasperated “Come on, can you crawl back into the womb?” is met with “the wind blows where it will.”

We want straightforward answers, we want to make God into an informational technology, a way to relate to God that lets us keep our defensive distance because all our experience has taught us not to take authorities at their word, why would God be any different?

But God in Christ is determined to lead us on a path that brings us into a relationship with God as God is: completely for us and in a way that allows us to be more for others and more ourselves and for ourselves.

It is this process, this grand discovery, whether by night, by day, and certainly over the course of a lifetime, that the church calls Trinity. Not a new truth about God beyond the culmination of all the feasts we celebrate from Advent to Pentecost, but where we find ourselves when we go deeper down the rabbit hole than we might have previously dared,

Or, to use the language of the Gospel and the image of the Wizard of Oz, the Wind, the Spirit sweeps us off our feet and after shaking off the dust we realize, not only aren’t we in Kansas anymore, we’re where we need to be and where we’ve always hoped we would end up: a new home, a new relationship: that’s Trinity.

Trinity is where we live; it’s how we describe how we’re living now that we’ve encountered Christ.

It’s fulfilling but it’s challenging. In fact—and we know this from anything wonderful we’ve ever engaged in—it’s fulfilling precisely *because* it’s challenging!

In God’s love we experience the presence of a loving and wise Father. But we discover, as Israel did that this Father, wants us, as Paul says in our second reading to “put to death the deeds of the body.”

This because, to live non-defensively with God is to begin to reflect the completely “for us” love that God shows us to others.

Indeed, counterintuitively, we put to death the deeds of the body (the flesh, the ways of the world) not in order to rob ourselves of life, but in order to avoid “the deeper death,” the death of unfulfillment, the death of separation from our deeper purpose.

Our humanness flourishes not when we get our instinctive and easily attainable way but as we begin to recognize as Nicodemus was struggling to understand in his dialogue with Jesus that what seems desirable on the surface is taking away from the love-giving God.

This because many desires tend in the direction of securing our pleasure and safety and security at the expense of another’s true fulfillment and this is as true in the economic realm as it is in the sexual realm.

We find our way by fasting the flesh’s gratification. It’s not that most deeds done by the body, sexual, culinary, pleasurable are opposed to God, but it is part of our great adventure to discern what is Just-Loving, Just-Living, Just-Playing.

It is certainly countercultural and can sound prudish, but self-discipline in partnership with God is a path to astounding fulfillment and joy and that one of the great secrets of the Christian Mystery is that those who live a disciplined life experience greater happiness.

We know of course, that when we look at our day-to-day experience that it doesn’t always feel like this, therefore, it can be helpful to read about or, better, get to know people who have tried to live well, who experienced what Paul is talking about here but are honest enough to say that sometimes they felt like giving up

That they, like Nicodemus in his confusion, like Isaiah in the feeling that he had of personal and corporate guilt when confronted with the three-fold holiness of God, sometimes felt undone.

Right now I’m reading through Job as part of the Daily Office and I’m struck by how the church often avoids the pain that comes from believers who are seeking to navigate the Mystery of God and thus the mystery of life.

Some people walk away from the faith when confronted by it’s complexity, it’s demands even in view of its astounding promise.

Why that happens and others persist is part of the grand Mystery. I think part of it has to with the fact that those who persist have caught a glimpse of the fact that the holiness of God glimpsed by Isaiah is the love of God lived out for people that we seen in Jesus.

The great theologians, and I note two here, one Catholic and one Protestant, have pointed this out. Karl Rahner, influential in the great Second Vatican Council and largely responsible for helping the Catholic Church become more open to modern culture used to say that “the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity.”

That is to say that what we can’t even imagine, the Infinite God transcending time and place, utterly holy, that is separate from all that is created by virtue of metaphysical superiority and difference is, not in theory but in fact, the lived story of God in pursuit of every single human being all the way to the cross and beyond.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, an ecumenical theologian, Lutheran by association, coined what has come to be known as Pannenberg’s rule which says that the divinity of God and the Kingdom of God are inseparable. In other words, we can answer the question “what/who/where is divinity” by looking at how God’s Kingdom operates among us.

The Father’s Love, Jesus’ death and Resurrection, new life in the Spirit. This is the summary of the feasts, the summary of the Grand Story.

Julian of Norwich the great English mystic held an acorn and said, the universe was contained within it, one could say that God is contained in that summary or, like the acorn, breaks out of that summary and grows into every heart and every place

“Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts” is and becomes “For God so Loved the World that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Like Isaiah, occasionally I find myself stunned and undone by such a love, like Nicodemus, we find ourselves wanting to keep pursuing, keep search and like Paul we find we want to live with or bodies in tune with Mystery and Desire, our own, if you will trinitarian response to Love. Praise Creator, Reconciler and Renewer!