

The Spirit as Guide”

Today is Trinity Sunday. In the Apostles’ Creed each Sunday, we refer to the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is a very difficult concept to understand. The theology is not easy. Most ministers, if they are honest, will admit they do not have the best grasp of it. This means most in the church have a hard time with the theology as well.

One analogy which is often used to explain the Trinity is the phases of water. Water can exist as a solid (ice), a liquid and a gas. But this analogy is not theologically correct. Water can only exist in one phase at a time. In the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in three distinct persons, all exist at the same time. They are one but three distinct persons.

The book and movie, *The Shack*, also attempt to portray the Trinity. Although *The Shack* has some good points in its story, it still borders on bad theology as well. The concept is just not easy to explain by reason.

I will not claim I can explain to you today the theology of the Trinity. That would take much more time and Bible study along with looking at various books by various theologians. The one thing I emphasize today is we must look at the relationship in the Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all in relationship with each other. They are also all in relation with you as a Christian.

The Father is the Creator, the Son Jesus is the Savior, and the Holy Spirit is the Paraclete. Paraclete is the Greek word used to describe one who is called alongside to help. The Trinity is not understood by reason but by faith in God. God must be encountered through a relationship that grows from faith.

This week's gospel lesson from John 16:12-15 comes from what is known as Jesus' final discourse with his disciples. It is during the time of the Last Supper and before he is arrested and finally crucified. He is talking to them about the work of the Holy Spirit, who will be there to guide them when Jesus is no longer there. One key function of the Paraclete, as Jesus as told them in John 14:20, will be to "remind them of all that Jesus has said to them." When the disciples are in need they can turn to the guidance from the Holy Spirit. The Paraclete enables the Christian community at any time to reach back into the teachings of Christ and to bring Jesus' teachings to life afresh with new understanding.

What does this mean for the church today? As we learned last week at the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has been given to us to empower us. Once we believe in Jesus as our savior and are reconciled with God, we have the Holy Spirit in our lives. We need the guiding truth from the Paraclete, the one who is alongside us to comfort us and to guide us. We need this guidance today. The church is struggling with its existence. How does the church remain relevant today with the

cultural changes which are going on? These changes have been going on for several years and will continue. We cannot stand still and just say we are going to do the things the same way. We have to know when to keep traditional practices and when to adopt new practices.

John Wesley taught that when we encounter issues, we need to use four steps of analysis when we figure out what to do. These are scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Today, as we travel through new territory, experience is the key to figuring out what to do. We need to remember to let the Holy Spirit guide us through these experiences as we encounter them. Jesus' words in John 16:12-13, speak to the importance of fresh encounters with the words of Jesus, given at the time of need, not in advance, and identifies the Paraclete as the medium of these encounters.

The words of Jesus that community members are able to receive before a crisis are quite distinct from the words that the community is able to receive during or after a crisis. For example, if someone tried to tell an adolescent what he or she would need to hear from Jesus to endure what life will bring at thirty, fifty, or seventy years of age, the adolescent would not be able to "bear them." In fact, the adolescent would probably not even listen. The words of Jesus that the community needs to hear to make sense of the church's place in changing social and economic

circumstances are likewise unbearable in advance, because there is no context for such words in advance of the situation of need. Just think of this scenario. Would you have wanted to hear some forty years ago what situation you face today? Probably not. John portrays the Paraclete as the guarantee that the words of Jesus will always be available as fresh words for any and all futures. We must rely on the Holy Spirit as we encounter new situations.

At the Last Supper, Jesus could have told the disciples much more than he did about the future but he knew they could not bear what he would say. They were not yet in a position to take it on. The truth that Jesus would have them know had to be learned through the experience of the passion, death, and resurrection that would await them in the days to come.

In part, the fullness that Jesus has in mind can only be glimpsed on the other side of Easter. Even at the Last Supper, the disciples' ability to understand who Jesus really is---the one who washes their feet, the one who goes where they cannot follow---remains incomplete. Only after discovering the empty tomb and experiencing the risen Christ will Peter and the other disciples began to fully believe in him. They have experienced many miracles but, like us, they need to be lead in truth by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus reassures them that the Spirit will guide them into that truth. We are given that same assurance. John's words emphasize that the Paraclete will not just teach us but guide us. We need to depend on the Paraclete as we experience our faith. By leading them experientially into the truth, the Spirit shows Jesus' followers what they must do. Truth is revealed to us. In short, all knowledge of God is given to us by the Trinity.

There is still so much that Jesus wants to say to us, but we cannot bear it until we, too, are led and guided and formed by a life lived in the Holy Spirit. We must be drawn into the divine life of the Holy Trinity before we can know any truth about God.

How does this happen? As demonstrated at Pentecost, the Spirit's first work is to speak to us and through us in prayer. We must be in prayer to God to lead us through the Spirit and always listen.

Knowledge of God is a gift that depends on the one who gives it by leading us to a place where we can receive it. That journey is the journey of faith. Knowing the truth of who God is, therefore, begins with a relationship with the one who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.