

Sermon: Taking Her Stand

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

16 June 2019

Based on **John 16:12-15; Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31**

For the past few weeks, we've been talking about unity, from Jesus' desire for unity among his disciples to the unity between tribes and nations through the twin stories of Babel and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. But mostly we've heard about our unity with God, which is the unity that matters most. Today, we are challenged to think about the unity and truth *of* God, and about how Scripture informs our thinking.

Years ago, a friend of ours asked me about the doctrine of the Trinity, what it was and how come it didn't make any sense to him. He's a smart guy, retired, a Korean War vet who now lives up in Maine somewhere. He thinks deeply about his theology, so if he was confused about something, it wasn't from a lack of trying. And as it happened, I had just finished reading a book about the Trinity, so I recommended it to him to read, which he did. When he returned the book, he said, 'Thank you. That was very interesting. I learned a lot from it, but now I'm thoroughly confused.'

And that pretty much sums up how most of us relate to the Trinity as a doctrine, because it asks us to understand God in three persons based only on what Scripture tells us, which is not much because Scripture doesn't care about doctrines. Scripture just reports what it knows. Even professional theologians get confused.

The very first verse in the entire Bible goes like this: 'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while *a wind from God* swept over the face of the waters. Then God *said*, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.' That wind from God is the Holy Spirit.

In his Gospel, John muddies the waters immediately in his first verse, saying, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

We presume John is talking about Jesus, which answers the question, ‘Who was God talking to in Genesis 1?’ But in Proverbs 8, Lady Wisdom says, ‘That was me!’ You can see how Scripture doesn’t mind turning us into a pretzel. In a monotheistic culture, the doctrine of the Trinity was meant to explain Jesus’ role as God-with-us but all it did was cause controversy.

But it took a while. Things really got going in the third and fourth centuries. By then, everyone agreed that Proverbs 8 somehow referred to Jesus Christ. And they came to that conclusion because they saw unity in Scripture, including the Scripture of the Hebrew Bible. It had to be right. Even the contradictions had to be for a reason.

The controversy really revolved around the correct interpretation of Scripture, and that, we know, is open to endless discussion. Getting to doctrine from interpretation was a long and bumpy road. Proverbs 8 might have been the biggest bump.

The Book of Job includes a mysterious interlude in chapter 28, a poem which interrupts chapter 27 to ask the questions, ‘Where can Wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?’ (Job 28:12) The answer is, it cannot be found in any *place*, the way one can dig for gold or minerals. Wisdom is more precious than metals or jewels and you can’t put a value on it. At the end of the poem, it takes God to point out that Wisdom is about a way of being, that fear of the Lord is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding (28:28).

And then, in chapter 29, ‘Job again took up his discourse...’ It’s as if someone wedged chapter 28 in between 27 and 29 because it was just too good to leave out. But it had little to do with Job’s problems.

So, for the early Christian theologians, Jesus remained a problem. If Wisdom personified in Proverbs 8 really was a reference to Jesus, then how do you get past verses such as these:

YHWH *created* me at the beginning of His course as the first of His works of old (22); I was *fashioned* (23); I was *brought forth* (24); I was *born* (25) or, better, *begat*; I was *there* (27); I was *with* Him as a confidant (30) or master worker.

In the third century, Origen wrote that he wanted ‘to see what the only-begotten Son of God is,’ if Jesus was truly the ‘firstborn of all creation.’ Origen wanted to know when did the Word who knew the Father *not* exist? And that was the crux of the controversy. Is Jesus God, or the Son of God? Eternal with God, or brought forth by God? Begotten of God, or equal to God? You could build a career writing about it, but ultimately, the answer is unknowable.

Christians believe that Jesus is God Incarnate – fully divine yet fully human. The Gospels tell us that he walked among us, teaching, preaching, and healing people. This is not an unreasonable belief.

In the psalms alone, we find a variety of images of an incarnate God: God is our refuge; God plants and tends the vineyard; God is a king, warrior, parent, shepherd. The Bible includes metaphors for God's face, hands, mouth, voice, and breath. God has always been incarnational.

At the event we call the Last Supper, Jesus did a lot of talking, packing in as much new information as he could because he knew his time was short and he still had many things to say to the disciples. He was especially concerned that they know that he wasn't going to leave them on their own, that he would send the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, to guide them.

When Jesus came before Pontius Pilate, he said, 'I came into this world to testify to the truth,' and Pilate asked, 'What is truth?' (John 18:37-38)

Jesus is talking about the truth of God's enduring presence, even when we are not necessarily present for God. He's talking about the fullness of God's infinite love that we're not ready to bear because it is awesome and terrifying at the same time. He's talking about a truth that Pilate would not have understood, that God is love, and that God is within us.

According to Jesus, the Holy Spirit is the church's teacher and guide. This goes to the heart of what it means to be the church. We invoke the Spirit at church council meetings when we're trying to figure out what's next. The big thing we're trying to sort out now is defining our role in the community.

We have a tremendous church history; they still talk about us down the street. We have a very cool church building. And we're part of the tapestry that makes up Hingham and indeed the nation. The problem is, no one but us knows about it. So, we need to step outside the building and rediscover what it means to be the church today. The problem is knowing how to do that. We pray for the Spirit's guidance in making New North a spiritual home where all are welcome.

We don't often talk about doctrine in church. Pulling apart a doctrine is not the same as pulling apart Scripture. We look to the Bible for meaning. Sometimes, though, we get readings that may not have to mean anything in order to teach us something.

One thing about the doctrine of the Trinity, though, is that it makes us think about our relationship with God, and with the Spirit's relationship with God and Jesus, and Jesus with God and the Spirit. It's a good way to stay busy on a rainy day.

But we like to say ours is a faith seeking understanding, so even though today's two readings may not have a direct application for improving our daily lives, they do give us plenty to think about in how we live those lives.

Jesus had one more thing to reveal to his disciples, and that is love itself, the love that he shares with God the Father and God the Spirit. Just love.

Amen.