

MANIFESTATIONS OF THE HOLY; JOHN 16:12-15; TRINITY SUNDAY; MAY 22, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

It's Trinity Sunday. The notion of the Trinity is as far from the Enlightenment idea of the Watchmaker God – our modern conception of God – as one could possibly get.

When the scientific method evolved in the 18th century to measure and explain *the how* of the material world – many said, one day, science would explain everything; and until then what we didn't understand we would call God. This became the infamous "God of the Gaps" – the gaps in our scientific understanding of the universe, but even these would be unlocked, mystery explained and the need for God eliminated. The Watchmaker God is a distant, disengaged Creator who designed and started creation like a well-made watch then stepped away since the creation no longer needed a God.

The confidence and bluster in this method of deduction seems, today, comic if not a plain and simple illustration of hubris. From Spinoza to Einstein the greatest scientists and philosophers have acknowledged the vast complexity and mystery of the universe that will never be penetrated in our quest to understand how things work.

The Trinity, however, acknowledges a very different God. The God of the Trinity is an active, engaging, relentlessly personal and intimate God – the opposite, in every way of the modern Watchmaker deity.

But first a word about church doctrines like the Trinity. Someone once said the theological answers of one generation to the theological questions of the previous generation become the theological questions for the next generation – the history of the early church is the history of these questions and answers during the first three centuries of the Christian Era.

For example, when people were asking was Jesus human or divine, the early church concluded he was both – human and divine and thus invented the doctrine of the Incarnation. Similarly, when the question of the nature of God – Creator, Son and Spirit – was debated the doctrine of the Trinity was developed. If you can imagine what it was like before there were accepted definitions of the nature of God and Jesus – you can appreciate the challenges of shaping our faith.

Theological doctrines about the nature of God and Jesus are human constructs – our best attempts to describe that which is indescribable.

When we talk about the Trinitarian God – Creator, Son and Holy Spirit – what we are saying, one writer said, is that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery.

But there's more: another important feature of the idea of the Trinity is that God does not need the creation in order to have something to love because within himself love happens. The three persons of God are three distinct persons who love one another. The point of which is that *the essence of God is active love*. This is God, not as a noun but as a verb. The Trinity is 'love in action'; 'God in action.'

God's love existed before creation did but it was not willing to stay put. So the Creator sent Jesus; Jesus is a God who gets personal; in fact, in his day some said "too close for comfort." They said, "That's not the way God is supposed to act."

It's true, we are more comfortable with an abstract, generic, vague, and distant God – the idea that we can't say anything too definite about God because God is large, vague and, of course, spiritual.

But when we say today that God is 'more mystery than we can fathom' we are not saying that God is vague or distant. It's just to acknowledge that God is more than we can comprehend; more than even the best minds can finally and fully articulate.

The Trinity is God in action, a God who refuses to remain confined to some hermetically sealed idea of a high sounding principle. Jesus of Nazareth, therefore, is God in motion toward us, God refusing to stay enclosed in God's own divinity.

An often-repeated criticism of Jesus was that he "welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus intruded where he was not invited, sometimes where he was not wanted. The thing that upset Jesus' critics was not that Jesus loved people but that Jesus actively received, ate with, and thereby loved "the wrong" people.

Jesus not only showed us that God is love but that God's love is considerably more interesting, active, expansive, determined and bold than we are used to thinking or expecting or even in our rebellion, wanting.

But in order to keep God distant, vague and irrelevant, many people want to keep God simplistic, uncomplicated and abstract – the Hallmark God who never raises his voice and is always lavender. The problem is once we discovered that "God was in Christ," things got complicated not because the church wanted to make the simple faith of Jesus complex and confusing but because we discovered in Jesus God was at once much more demanding and interesting than we ever could have imagined.

Which means 'personal'. God got personal with us in Jesus. God made the shift from a pillar of cloud or burning bush or still small voice to God as a tangible, living, breathing presence as in a human being standing before us. Someone once said everything we ever need to know about God is visible, audible and revealed in Jesus. That's why God sent Jesus.

But then Jesus sent the Holy Spirit. The tangible, living, breathing Jesus – confronting, comforting and communicating with us – anticipating his death, promises his disciples in today's text that he will send the Holy Spirit. In effect, Jesus said, 'I am so determined to remain part of your life, I am going to send the Holy Spirit to make sure we stay constantly connected.' "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will declare to you the things that are to come." Those are extravagant claims – but then the early church had extravagant needs. What the church needed then and now is not so much new information as fresh eyes, fresh discernment – and to that end the Holy Spirit is a timely gift.

Here's an example. A colleague shared about the time he visited a pastor who had labored thirty years in an out of the way Missouri crossroads. My colleague asked that pastor how on earth he was able to do it. The pastor replied, "God loves these sorts of places. We may be off the beaten path so far as the world is concerned but, by God, we are not as remote as Bethlehem. If you are going to be close to God, you need to get yourself to those sorts of places where God hangs out."

A well-known scholar of Christian mission almost as if he replied to the comment by the Missouri pastor said, "mission is not primarily an activity of the church but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. Mission is a movement from God to the world; there is a church because there is mission; not vice versa".

Mission is the church in motion, driven by a God whose love never rests. We reach out to the world because God has reached out to us. The whole movement of the Divine is outward and toward; it is the antithesis of contained, stationary and removed.

The Trinity is about relationship – God in relationship with God's self – the first 'community' we might say; and that same one, triune God in relationship with us – God's people, the church; and then, you and me in relationship not just with one another but with the world; God sends Jesus; Jesus sends the Spirit; the Spirit sends you and me into the world.

That's why it's never enough to have wonderful worship and liturgy; or stimulating education; or fun fellowship; those are necessary aspects of our life together but not by themselves the purpose of our life together.

Yesterday was the WECF fair – a huge success, hundreds of people in and around this campus, families having fun, taking a needed break from their busy weekday lives to be together. Our early childhood program started in 1950 – it was then and continues to be an important mission of this church – of God and the Holy Spirit reaching out and toward others, toward young families with small children at a crucial juncture in their lives when they are shaping and forming their values and best practices as a family.

Last week was the end of year celebration of the remarkable ENERGY program – which is part of the amazing WEDI, Westminster Economic Development Initiative. WEDI is a mission of this church that started ten years ago – a mission, a movement of God at work, love in action, within this church family, outward and toward others in our community, new immigrant families in need.

I have said a few times already; that Jericho Road Ministries has invited us to support, with people and dollars, their new mission in the Congo. Talk about God's movement outward and toward those in need – Jericho Rd. is a stunning example of this restless, relentless God who moves to others in crisis, in need; love in action, God as a verb, Trinity as relationship, community.

Jericho Road is a medical mission on the West Side of Buffalo serving new immigrants that has started serving poor families on the East Side of Buffalo – over 40,000 served last years.

Jericho Road has a medical mission in Sri Lanka and has now taken over a medical mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that serves children who have lost their families in the Civil War and genocide that has plagued that nation over the past decade and more.

I don't know if that is the right mission or not for Westminster to embrace. But we are at a crossroads ourselves – like that Missouri pastor – it's time to discern where this active, engaging, confronting God is calling us to go – which, we can bet on it, is to the out of the way, unglamorous, difficult, even dangerous places where God likes to hang out.

It's time for us as a congregation and maybe you as an individual or family, to look over our shoulder, read between the lines, pay attention to subtle but real prodding, hints, and coincidences.

God as Trinity is immensely resourceful in reaching out to church's like this one and to people like you and me.

God is determined not to be a God in some far off distant heaven. But God like a magnet, like the seeking shepherd, the searching woman at the well, like the waiting father of the prodigal boy who was lost.

This is the God of the Trinity who will do whatever it takes, at any cost, to get us to know him, enjoy him and serve him. That is, share him with the world. Amen.