Character Produces Hope

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We will receive today an offering to support Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, who provide presence and support in Oklahoma following the devastating tornado, and who provide support and presence in many places, globally and domestically, when disaster strikes. It’s as good of an investment as you can make in anything right now, and along with our prayers, people in Oklahoma need our resources. You may give through a special offering envelope this morning, or in electronic ways that are described in the bulletin. Thank you in advance for your support.

On this Memorial Day weekend, I would ask that all those present this morning who have served our military in some form or fashion to please stand…Thank you for your service.

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Sometime along the way I saw a plaque or a t-shirt or a bumper sticker that said “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” Perhaps you have seen it as well. That American Idol singer Kelly Clarkson turned that phrase into a catchy popular song means that it is even further etched onto our consciousness.

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” I understand the sentiment; that we face challenges and hardships, and that as long as they are not lethal, they are beneficial to our growth and development.

But in some ways, at least to me, the phrase seems almost trite, that we should somehow seek to welcome difficulties and hardships as character-building opportunities.

Perhaps this is a good discussion for a long walk or a study group, and perhaps I am missing the point. But what I want to say in response is simply this, that all I am able to say about what doesn’t kill us is that it doesn’t kill us.

We know that difficulties and hardships will happen. Jobs will collapse. Diagnoses will shake our world. Relationships will crumble. Loved ones will die. We do not need to seek things out; they will find us.

M. Scott Peck’s well-known book from a generation ago, The Road Less Travelled, begins with the simple and straightforward affirmation: “Life is hard.” And it is. That doesn’t counter millions of t-shirts and competing bumper stickers that say that “life is good,” but we know as well that “life is hard.”

And we needn’t seek experiences that will prove that. They will find us.

Today is what we call Trinity Sunday. Unlike every other special liturgical day we mark, it commemorates not a biblical event – not Jesus’ birth or death or the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, which we remembered last Sunday. Rather, Trinity Sunday marks a concept, a theological concept. Or at least it can seem that way.

The doctrine of the Trinity is at once our most fundamental faith affirmation and our most complex. Our friends in other faith traditions ask us how we can call ourselves “monotheistic,” that is, worshipping
one God, when in fact we talk of three divine entities – God, Jesus, the Spirit, or Father, Son and Holy Ghost, or Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

That our language is inadequate to the task doesn’t make it any easier. We ourselves can become confused. We have spilled lots of ink over the centuries, and a little blood, over this. In fact the biggest controversy in Christian history caused the church to split, east and west – about our understanding of the Holy Spirit.

On one hand it can seem so overly esoteric. On another hand it matters as it helps us understand the very nature of the God to whom we relate.

This Sunday, Trinity Sunday, marks a concept and not an event. But what it also does is mark an ongoing series of biblical moments. And it marks a relationship.

- Our Israelite forbears experience God as the creator of the universe, but also as one who intervened for them in slavery and who journeyed with them in exile.
- Those who experienced Jesus’ ministry did so for a very few years. But even given a wide breadth of understanding Jesus’ life and death and resurrection, can we not claim that ministry’s presence and influence and inspiration now, that there are moments some 2000 years later when Jesus is as close to us as a dear friend or a trusted teacher or an advocate or prophet who pushes us to say the right thing or do the right thing?
- And the Spirit – our ongoing experience of the presence of God. Like the murmur of a dove’s song, we sang last week. “Like the murmur of the dove’s song, like the challenge of her flight, like the vigor of the wind’s rush, like the new flame’s eager might.” (Carl P. Daw)

That has been our experience as well. We may interact with each person of the Trinity – that’s the theological language, “persons of the Trinity” – we may interact with each one differently, or differently at different points of our lives. But rather than marking a theological concept – and you know I love my theological concepts – I like to think that naming the Trinity names our experiences. And it names the ways we relate to and connect with God.

In John’s gospel this morning, Jesus connects the dots for us. If you have a Bible where the words of Jesus are printed in red, we are smack in the middle of a big-time, red-letter Jesus section, what the scholars call his “farewell discourses.” He is preparing to say goodbye to his followers. They, and he, are worried about how they will fare when he is gone. He tells them that he knows that he has said so much, shared so much, revealed so much, that they – and we, presumably – simply cannot grasp it all. It’s too much, like drinking water from a fire hose, as a friend of mine says.

Do not worry, Jesus says. Do not worry. When I am gone, and the Spirit comes, the Spirit will guide you into all the truth. Here is the Trinity, he is saying, without ever calling it that. I am here now, but will be gone. The Spirit is here now but will be ever more present and real when I am away from you physically. And through it all I and the Father are one.

God’s presence with us is ongoing and continuing, and diverse. And it will help us navigate what lies ahead.

Charles Cousar writes that the truth about the things to come “no doubt includes both eschatological events (matters of the end of time) and the immediate circumstances the community faces as it seeks to
live out its calling…(W)hat the church needs is not new information,” Cousar says, “but fresh discernment, better focused eyes with which to read the signs of the times and the relevance of the message.” (Texts for Preaching, Year C, page 358-360)

That is to say, to return to the place where we started, that when difficulties and hardships happen, we are called to respond on two levels. When we lose a job or receive a diagnosis or get a dreaded call with an unwanted message, we must respond in the moment. How will we take the next step? How will we make the decision right in front of us? How will we cope day-to-day?

But we also respond in a bigger moment, across the arc of our life story. What does this moment mean in the context of all our moments. How does this dot connect with all the other dots of my life, or my family’s life? And how does the immediate moment and the larger story connect with my faith, or, rather, how does faith make a difference in the here-and-now and in the long term.

And Jesus is simply saying that it does, that when it all seems too much and so much that we will experience the Trinity in such a way that we will endure, that God, in all the ways that we experience God, will be with us.

You can read the first five verses of the fifth chapter of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the church at Rome and experience the heart of the gospel, the heart of faith. “…since we are justified by faith,” Paul says, “we have peace with God.” Justified by faith means that there is nothing we can do to earn God’s favor, or un-do to lose it. Our relationship with God is secure, beyond all security. Therefore we have peace with God through Jesus, Paul says. That is grace. So that when sufferings happen, and they will, we have hope.

For Paul the sufferings came through the proclamation of faith itself. Rejection, imprisonment, beating. To return to our bumper sticker, I am sure that Paul, the human Paul, would have been satisfied to have avoided those moments. Though there is a long and strong streak of embracing pain and sacrifice in the Christian tradition – perhaps we remember a particular character in The DaVinci Code – in my understanding of this, we should not seek those experiences in and of themselves, for their own sake. Martyrs, in the best sense, did what they were called to do and faced the consequences. Martin Luther King, Jr. did not seek suffering for its own sake; it came with his calling.

The same for us. Because we care, we will be disappointed. Because we love, we will know grief. Suffering will come – personally and vocationally. It will come as we live our lives.

As I have said many times recently, we are putting our toe in the water when it comes to public education in Rochester and urban gun violence. I am sure that the deeper we go into this the more frustration and disappointment we will experience. The problems are so big and the solutions are so elusive. But I am sure as well that the deeper we go into this the more hope we will experience, as we discern and collaborate and have confirmed to us that the task is the right one and the cause is just.

The same for our own personal difficulties and hardships, our own personal sufferings. We needn’t seek them out; they will find us. Life is hard. And I mean not to be simplistic or Pollyannaish about this. Grief is real. Pain is real. We cannot simply close our eyes and pray it away.

But whether we understand it or not, and however we might experience it, I believe this promise – that God is with us, in Jesus, through the Spirit. I believe that grace does not make bad things cease from
happening, but grace picks them up and puts them in a different place, so that, with hope, we can endure.

We needn’t seek things that if they don’t kill us will toughen us. But when such things happen – and they will – the Triune God has created us and redeemed us and sustained us, so that suffering produces endurance, and that endurance produces character, and that character produces hope and that hope does not disappoint. And that hope does not disappoint because God’s love has been poured into our hearts.

Beverly Gaventa writes that “...the Trinity provide(s) the basis for Christian existence. Christians live in peace with God because of Jesus Christ. Christians know the love of God because the Holy Spirit has poured out that love to them. If Christians today,” she says, “find talk about the Trinity abstract and remote, for Paul it is as close a life itself.’ (Page 358)

The writer Kathleen Norris has written about two particular sets of sufferings. One she calls “acedia,” something akin to deep depression that features apathy, melancholy, a distinct lack-of-caring about anything. Her second suffering was the chronic illness and slow death of her husband. As he neared death, Norris writes that she felt a “sudden and ferocious temptation to doubt...I thought: What if none of this is true? What if there is no God, no Christ, no angels to sing to him in his rest, no meeting again in heaven?”

Then she remembered the words of the poet Robert Lax. “When the time comes, we pick up our duds and return to where we came from. We’re all brought into this life because heaven loves us, and back to that love we go.” (Acedia & me, pages 257-258) That may not be the most orthodox articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, able to withstand rigorous theological scrutiny. But it is true. And it allows us to live our lives, and to endure our sufferings, whatever they may be and whatever they will be, with hope.

May the love of God, and the peace of Jesus, and the strength and comfort of the Spirit, be with us all, and with all those we love. Amen.