

HOLY TRINITY C

May 30, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Proverbs 8:1—4, 22—31 Psalm 8 Romans 5:1—5 John 16:12—15

Back when I was in seminary, any of us future pastors who had completed the first year preaching courses were allowed to take pulpit supply assignments. The seminary had a pulpit supply coordinator who would take requests from churches calling in looking for supply preachers and match us up with assignments. This was a good way for a starving student to pick up a hundred dollars or so a week.

One day in systematic theology class, the day we were to begin our studies on the Trinity, the professor began the lecture with this question: For which day of the church year do you think the seminary receives the greatest number of requests for supply preachers? Several guesses were made, all wrong.

The single day of the church year that pastors would most like to avoid? THIS day, Holy Trinity. As soon as the professor told us that, we all knew why. This is the day on which our congregations expect us to *explain* the Trinity to them.

As we quickly learned in systematic theology class that day, it is *impossible* to explain the Trinity without committing heresy! Every metaphor was tried to explain how God could be three, yet one. We tried the water metaphor: God is like the three phases of water – liquid, gas, and solid. Nope, not good enough. We tried the

shamrock metaphor: God is like a three-leaf clover. Nope, also wrong. Every metaphor that any of us had learned in Confirmation class was offered, and all were torn to shreds, shown exactly how they are inadequate to explain the mystery of our three-in-one God.

And yet, here we preachers stand, year after year, seeking to explain the inexplicable. This is the only day of the church year that calls us to ponder a teaching of the church rather than a teaching of Jesus. The scriptural readings for today provide Bible backup for a word you'll never find in the Bible: Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not something Jesus explained to us. It, like most doctrines, came out of the experience of the early believers. How can we put our experiences of God the Creator and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit into words?

There are probably a number of people who imagine that the idea of the Trinity was thought up by ivory-tower theologians who, typically, were making things more complicated than they needed to be and were obscuring the simple faith of regular believers. In fact, it seems that the process worked pretty much the other way around. Practicing believers and worshipers were driven by their experiences of God's activity to the awareness that God related in several different ways to the creation. ... Thus what these believers came to

insist upon was that God had to be recognized as being in different forms of relationship with the creation, in ways at least like different persons, and that all these ways were divine, that is, were of God. Yet there could not be three gods. God, to be the biblical God and the only God of all, had to be one God. This complex and profound faith was then handed over for the theologians to try and make more intelligible. They have been trying ever since.¹

A simple definition of theology is: putting our experiences of God into words (*theos* = God + *logos* = word). It is literally, "God-talk." The doctrine of the Trinity is our human attempt to use words to define God – and none of our words or images will be adequate to capture all of God.²

And yet we continue trying to explain the mystery of God. Theologian Mary Anderson offers this story... She says:

I was watching my grandmother sleep during her afternoon nap. As I contemplated her existence, I thought wisely. "That's Grandmama, Mamma, and Odell." She smiled in her sleep as I called her by the names used for her by her grandchildren, her daughter, and her husband. Three names, three relationships – and yet the same person. Amazing!³

1 Frederick Houk Borsch, quoted in Brian Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes: John 16.12-15, Holy Trinity Sunday – Year C. <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john16x12.htm>, accessed 6/1/2004.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

Our God did not simply create the universe and then step away, observing distantly to see what would happen. The God who created us cared enough, from the very beginning, to want to be in relationship with us. We're told in the early chapters of the book of Genesis that God walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. And despite humanity's fall into sin, God has remained in relationship with us.

I've been reading one of the first books to arrive on our Transfiguration Team table. It's by Leonard Sweet, a professor at Drew Theological Seminary in Madison. The title of the book is *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*. In this book Professor Sweet seeks, utilizing the model of Starbucks, to show us how we might be a better church in a post-modern world. It'd like to share one of his stories with you. He begins:

I shall never forget an order I placed at a Columbus (Ohio) Starbucks, across the street from Trinity Lutheran Seminary where I was lecturing. The experience is etched in my memory for two reasons. One, the Starbucks store was in an old bank building, so you could take your venti frappuccino into the vault and drink it there. Second, my exchange with the barista is one that is still with me as if it happened yesterday.

I love the fact that Starbucks is open at an early and dark hour of 5:30 a.m. My early-and-dark drink is a “black eye.” My friend Steve [Laue] says that having your favorite brew waiting for you at the cash register is like having your own pew in church. But in Columbus, Ohio, when I asked for a black eye, my order was thrown back at me: “You know, sir, that's not in the book.”

“But you know what it is, right?”

“Yeah, I know what it is. But it's not in the book.”

“Is a 'red eye' in the book?”

“No, that's not in the book either.”

“But you know what a red eye is, right?”

“It's not in the book, sir.”

“Okay,” I said. “I give up. What book are you talking about?”

“The Starbucks Book, our bible,” he said, as he handed me a little cream-colored booklet entitled “Make It Your Drink.” When I opened it, the first page leaped into my face even more than the Starbucks employee had. In big letters it read, “Learning the Lingo.”

This was not a training manual written for aspiring baristas. This was a booklet designed to be read by customers. Starbucks expects us to learn its

lingo. Members of its staff are trained to help us comprehend a language we do not yet speak. Starbucks doesn't say, "I won't serve you until you learn my lingo." But it does want us to learn its tribal lingo and offers resources such as this catechesis to help tutor us. *So much for the seeker-sensitive coffee shop*, I thought. And what does it say for the seeker-sensitive church?

Starbucks wants us to participate fully in the experience, even to the extent of learning to speak a new language. Talk about being immersed in coffee culture. Of course, Starbucks would like you to try as many drinks as possible as you learn its lingo, and the "Make It Your Drink" booklet is designed to help you mix and match as you perfect your signature drink. There are fifty-five thousand possible drink combinations on the board at a typical Starbucks.

Sure enough, as I flipped through the booklet I couldn't find a black eye. But here was a new dialect, a living language growing from the ground up. I then thought of how differently I would order my early-and-dark drink if I were at a Caribou Coffee in either Atlanta or Minneapolis. At Caribou Coffee I wouldn't order a black eye (coffee of the day with two shots of espresso; a red eye adds one shot of espresso). At Caribou, I'd order "two shots in the dark." At Dunkin' Donuts, I'd order a "Turbo Hot." And if I were ordering at the most

righteous, right-on, politically correct coffeehouse, Peet's of Berkeley, I'd order "two depth charges."

Suddenly it hit me: I'm multilingual in coffee. Is that sick or what?

If we can be multilingual in coffee, why not in other areas of life? Is there only one way to say, "I'm a Christian" or "Do you know God?"⁴

So, just as we are expected to be multilingual in speaking about God, using different language to reach different people with the Good News of the God who wants to be in relationship with us, is it not also reasonable to see that God is also multilingual?

God has spoken, and continues to speak to us, in different languages. God, seeking to be in relationship with us, has been, is, and will be known as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and yet they are one. God speaks to us using the "language" or person who is best able to communicate the message that we need to hear. Our God is one, speaking to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all so that we may know how much He loves us and wants us to be His, forever.

Amen.

<1,663 words>

⁴ Leonard Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2007), 66-7.