

“Who Are You?”

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

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Trinity Sunday

Psalm 8 ~ John 3:1-17

I didn't attend my 45th high school reunion last summer, but several of my old friends did. I say "old" friends, meaning not only longtime friends ... but as evidenced by the photos I received ... some of them are looking pretty old. Some long hair hippie heads have gone bald ... some muscular chests have slumped well below the equator ... and time has increased the creases on their faces. Of course, I haven't changed at all while all my friends were getting old.

Apparently, one of the topics of conversation at the reunion was my calling as a pastor. To say that some people were surprised would not begin to do justice to their comments. People were more shocked that I had gone to seminary and had been ordained than they would have been to discover I had become a stripper. It's not that I was that much of a "wild child" in high school ... I was more of a "flower child" ... what can I say, it was the late sixties. I would like to you think that I embraced that era because of my raised social consciousness, but truth be told ... I liked the long, flowey skirts.

In chatting about the reunion, it was also interesting for me to hear what had become of everyone ... and to learn that no one's life seems to have turned out exactly as planned. Mine certainly didn't! When I look at my life in the flow of time, many, many years past the flowey skirts ... it seems a little overwhelming.

Lots of experiences in life overwhelm us. Stand on the rim of the Grand Canyon or fly over the Pacific Ocean. Gaze on the pyramids at Giza that were already more than a thousand years at the time of the Exodus ... or hold in your palm a piece of pottery shaped by another hand when Jesus was a boy. Suddenly you see your life for the fragile and brief breath that it is. Suddenly you begin to realize the magnitude of this eternal mystery we call "God." You catch your breath. You feel in the pit of your stomach what the psalmist felt when he looked at the starry sky and wrote, *"What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"* (Psalm 8:4). Amazing! We are so small. We are infinitesimal. Our minds are too primitive to comprehend the majesty of God. Our hearts are too small to contain the love of God. Our lives are too short to search out the works of God. Yet ... God cares for us!

Look at your own life ... all of it taken at once. What does it mean? How much of it has been under your control ... and how much has been beyond what you had planned? Where has God been at work in it? Did you realize it at the time? How close is God to you today? I ask you these questions because this is my job. My job is to get you to uplink to the God of the universe

... along with the psalmist ...to humble you before the majesty of God ... and to lift you to the love of God.

You and I throw this word "God" around as if we all knew exactly what it means, and we often forget that the One of whom we speak is right here with us ... still speaking to us. I suppose that's disrespectful in and of itself. Have you ever had anyone speak about you in the third person as if you weren't standing there? If we stop to think about it, maybe we shouldn't even use the word "God" at all. Maybe, like the ancient Jews ... out of reverence and awe ... we should not even pronounce it. After all, our lips aren't worthy of the word because of the reality for which it stands. At least if we remembered whom we invoke each time we speak it, perhaps we would use it more carefully.

"I still have many things to say to you," Jesus told the disciples in the upper room the night before he was crucified, *"but you cannot bear them now."* We heard his words in last week's gospel. Did he say this because they could not deal with the terror he was about to endure, or because ... if for a moment... they got a glimpse of the full majesty of the God he had come to reveal it would reduce them to ashes? But Jesus also promised that the Spirit of Truth would come to finish the revelation he began ... and what the Spirit reveals will be Jesus himself ... and the One Jesus calls the "Father." Jesus says much the same to Nicodemus, inviting him to image that we have the opportunity through our life in the Spirit to be born anew, born from above as God's children, those so precious that God was willing to give his only Son as testament to how much God loves all of us.

In this brief breath of our lives we experience God. We are spiritual creatures, every one of us. For some it is a vague sense of connection to something beyond themselves, but they cannot name it ... they do not see themselves in any way guided by or bound by it ... and they will scarcely bother with it. For others it is a projection of what they would want the Deity to be if they could make the Deity do what they want ... what Paul Tillich called "the Cosmic Bellhop" ... God as their own almighty personal valet. For still others it is a rigid definition of who God is and who God isn't ... and they will not turn away from their mental construct of God because they think it would be unfaithful. But if they already know "who God is and who God isn't" then God can teach them nothing new. I find truth somewhere among these. What we know of God, we know imperfectly, from a human point of view.

The story of the Bible is that God keeps surprising us in ways we do not expect, so we shouldn't presume we know all there is to know about God. The story of God in the Bible is that God refuses to be controlled. The God of the Exodus refuses to be reduced. The God in Jesus refuses to be manipulated. The God poured out as Spirit refuses to be contained. This God is dangerous to our plans and will not cater to our whims. But the story of the Bible is also that God is mindful of us and bends down to us to care for us.

We cannot search out God, but God has searched us out. We cannot control God, but God has guided us. *"What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"* It does not belong to our powers to define God, but God has disclosed God's self to us in three ways. We celebrate those three ways this day as we celebrate Trinity Sunday. First, we experience God as transcendent ... the eternal Creator vastly beyond our comprehension. When

we forget this majestic sovereignty, our God becomes too personal and narcissistic, even too small to handle our problems. God is more than a tribal totem or a household servant.

Second, we experience God as incarnate, in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth ... God with a human face, whom we can hear and understand and obey. When we forget this available Christ, our God becomes impersonal and remote ... uninvolved in our ordinary lives. God is more than the Force within creation.

And third, we experience God as the invisible Spirit ... God with us now in sudden and surprising ways ... God within us ... God at work in our own stories ... God still speaking to us. When we forget this immediate God, our God becomes all idea ... head-trip and history with no real impact on our lives.

These three God-experiences that we have are so consistent that we realize they are one and the same, and we call this self-disclosed God the "Trinity."

I realize the doctrine of the Trinity is heady stuff for a Sunday morning, hard to explain and even harder to relate to our day to day lives. Words like "doctrine," "Trinity," "theology" seem tedious and academic ... the stuffy trivialities of preachers and seminary professors. But it is important because, you see, our theology shapes us. We imitate the God we worship. Sometimes we make God over in *our* image ... we conform God to *our* likeness, and God is *our* self-projection written large. For instance, look at the pictures of Jesus in your Bible and see if he isn't as white as a Swedish librarian. Not only is that bogus historically, but it leaves many people out ... though most white folk naturally don't notice it. Of course, every race and every tribe has considered God one of their own kind. That's why the Bible insists we are made ... all of us ... in the image of God ... and not the other way round! And we are not to make images of God because God defines who God is, not us. And we are not to worship our images of God because they will surely misshape us.

The other night I watched a television program on strange religious practices around the world. They showed a group of people who make an annual pilgrimage to a temple where they work themselves into a trance and then pierce their bodies in grotesque ways, hanging fruit and trinkets from hooks gouged into their flesh. The ability to withstand the pain is understood to be a sign of unity with the gods. That program was followed by an expose on a Christian youth camp where workers were found guilty of abusing young people in the harsh and demeaning ways that they disciplined them. The people working at that camp believed strongly in "spare the rod and spoil the child" and they believed that they were only doing God's will. You see, we do imitate the God in whom we believe. If we think God is angry and vengeful, then we become angry and vengeful. If we think God is elitist and domineering, then we become elitist and domineering. If we think God is amorphous and undefineable, then we become amorphous and undefineable. But we don't have to fall into those traps because *we* believe that God has disclosed God's self specifically, as Trinity: Creator, Christ, and Spirit.

According to Jurgen Moltmann, this three-in-one God also shows us God as "a community of equals." If God is a Trinity of being, then we will see that equality, relationship, and love are built into the very nature of being. As Will Willimon puts it, "*We are created for communion*

and mutuality, not for division and competition. The world was created as a place of cooperation, interaction, and community." If we believe in a trinitarian God of relationship, we become more relational.

All of this being said, what matters most is that we tiny gnats ... riding our speck of dust through the vast spaces and endless times of the universe ... have experienced God ... because God has condescended to care about us. God, the almighty ... larger than space and older than time ... cares about us and calls us into relationship ... into the company of God's friends ... into life. Think about that today. No, don't think about it ... *feel it* ... like the psalmist ... in the pit of your stomach. Here you are at this moment in your life and the same Jesus who came two thousand years ago remembers you at our communion table as surely as you remember him. The same God who created the whole universe looks upon you in this moment with unfathomable care. The same Spirit who came upon Peter and John and the other disciples at Pentecost is here among us and inside you here and now today. You are not alone. Even if you have fallen down on your job ... even if time has been unkind to you ... even if your life has slipped by quickly while you were making other plans ... God is with you ... God cares about you. And who are you, that God should have you in mind and in heart? I'm talking "God" here. God! - with you! Doesn't that make you catch your breath ... at least a little bit? It's just amazing ... amazing grace! May we pray?

Forgive us God, when we presume to tell you who you are and what you're supposed to do and whom you like and dislike because we like or dislike them. Forgive us for speaking about you so often as if you were not here. Forgive us for trying to manipulate you into doing what we want while excising "obedience" and "faithfulness" from our personal vocabulary. Help us to remember who we are and put us in our place. Humble us, but remind us again that you remember us with an immense love. Thank you, God. Thank you. In the name of the Creator, and the Christ, and the Comforter, we give you all glory and honor forever and ever. Amen.