

# **Sermon for Sunday, June 7, 2009**

**First Sunday After Pentecost**

**(Trinity Sunday)**

**By Tim Ljunggren**

**First Lesson**      **Isaiah 6:1-8**  
**Psalm**              **29**  
**Second Lesson**    **Romans 8:12-17**  
**Gospel**              **John 3:1-17**

Today happens to be Trinity Sunday, which means that on this particular day, we try to figure out God and all of this one-God-three-persons mess.

And it really is a mess, isn't it? I mean, how do you describe something that you've never seen? Which reminds me of a story I once heard...

I am reminded of the young girl who is painting a picture and whose teacher asks her what she's painting. "Oh," says the girl, "I'm making a picture of God." "Oh," says the teacher, "You do know don't you that we don't know what God looks like." To which the girl replies, "Well, we will in about five minutes."

Any attempt to understand the Trinity eventually breaks down into a reminder that we will never fully understand the One in Three and Three in One whom we call God. Lord knows we try, however. And thanks be to God that the early church made the attempt to describe the God we praise and serve, because the church might have otherwise dissolved for lack of a common core. Any community needs a unifying belief to shape it and to hold it together, and the community of Christ is no exception. But it is critical that we remember that our efforts to define God are an expression of our human need and never a conclusive word on divine mystery.

Today's story about Nicodemus is a classic example of our desire to comprehend God and what an impossible task this is. Even when we have a breakthrough, even when we are granted a new awareness, there is always more waiting to be revealed. According to today's gospel, Nicodemus knew that Jesus came from God, and he told Jesus he knew. After all the befuddlement of his disciples, it's surprising that Jesus didn't slap Nicodemus on the back and say, "Praise the Lord, Nicodemus. Somebody actually gets it!"

But Jesus was never one to show an appreciation for being-right separate from an ever deepening and transforming relationship with God. So rather than praise Nicodemus for his knowledge, Jesus invites Nicodemus to step a little deeper into the mystery. "Come a little deeper into the Kingdom," Jesus says to Nicodemus. "Let the Spirit work with your eyes and your heart and your mind and your body so that you can be made a new person." To which Nicodemus says, "You must be crazy. I'm an adult. What you see is what you get. Birth is for newborns."

Jesus tries to explain what it means to be born of the Spirit, to let the transforming power of God create new life in us and on the earth, even through the worst of suffering, even through death. But Nicodemus slams the window on mystery's fingers. He's given a chance to get a glimpse of the real presence of God, and how that real presence wants to live in us in ways beyond our control or understanding, and he turns down the invitation.

In Nicodemus we recognize the tension with which we all live. We want to know God and God's ways. But when God approaches, in the many different ways God appears, we are not so sure we really want God's Holy Spirit to do a make-over with our lives. Or maybe we are willing, but we simply don't recognize the fullness that stands before us and extends its hand in love – love for us, and love for all others.

Sometimes we do manage to hang in there longer than Nicodemus did. Sometimes we are like Moses, who is minding his own business, until God interrupts his familiar life by appearing to Moses as a fire, burning but not consuming a bush. A burning bush in the dry wilderness would be startling enough. But a bush that doesn't disappear in the fire says to the seer: Something very unusual is going on here. So what does Moses do? Does he run in the opposite direction, hoping to convince himself that he is suffering from heat stroke? Or he does he approach the bush to see if he can figure out what exactly is going on. Moses decides to take a few steps deeper into the mystery, and as a result, he gets very, very close to God, so close that he finally has to hide his face.

Here again we recognize the familiar tension in which we live. We want to know our Creator. We want to walk in the ways of Jesus. We want to receive the indwelling of the Spirit, as persons and as church. We want to claim our

relationship as God's adopted children, named children because we lack the language or the wisdom or the history to comprehend a God who "gets" us and still loves us, just because we are.

But even as we long for this deep communion, we also fear its calling. Give us the joy, dear God, but spare us the sacrifice of saying no to our kingdom and yes to yours, of yielding to a life that is part free fall and part iron resolve, ever unfolding as we move closer and closer to the heart of God, which alone is unchanging. So we claim it's too late for us. Or we turn our head, away from one another and away from God.

As our church approaches General Convention, I've decided to treat the events in Columbus as one long burning bush. Since the bush isn't consumed, this isn't a hostile image. But in looking upon it as a burning bush, in the hopes that I could get as close as Moses before I have to turn my face, I open up the possibility that God will be revealed, in whatever joy or agony that burns there, and that all of us stand to be transformed by what transpires, whatever words we use to describe what transpires.

We will never "get" God. But fortunately God "gets" us. And apparently, not only does God "get" us, God comes to us in creation and in humanity and in a promised, transforming oneness – none of which we, in our humanness, can fully grasp, but all of which provide the openings through which God can grasp us. Amen.