

Sermon Trinity Sunday *"Who Is Your God?"* May 22, 2016

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. The Lord created me at the beginning of God's work, the first of God's acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth - when God had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil. When God established the heavens, I was there, when God drew a circle on the face of the deep, when God made firm the skies above, when God established the fountains of the deep, when God assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when God marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside the Lord, like a master worker; and I was daily God's delight, rejoicing before God always, rejoicing in God's inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

The Gospel John 16:12-15

Jesus said: I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, it will guide you into all the truth; for it will not speak on its own, but will speak whatever it hears, and will declare to you the things that are to come. The Spirit will glorify Me, because it will take what is Mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is Mine. For this reason I said that the Spirit will take what is Mine and declare it to you.

A recent obituary in the Richmond, Virginia Times-Dispatch reads: "Faced with the prospect of voting for either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton, Mary Anne Noland of Richmond chose, instead, to pass into the eternal love of God." Mrs. Noland's husband said one of her sons wrote the obituary's opening line as joke and as a way for her children to carry on her sense of humor. It's funny, but it's sad too because it's a comment about hopelessness... about cultural hopelessness.

The global United Methodist Church gathered this month for our General Conference, which meets every four years, and includes United Methodist delegates and Bishops from around the world. This year's Conference gathered little press coverage. It seems that the United Methodists gathering to debate (among other things

but notably) human sexuality is not new or exciting news. But there were reports and blogs written every day by delegates and others attending. One of those, who really spoke to me was delegate Karen Oliveto, professor at Pacific School of Religion, senior pastor of Glide Memorial United Methodist Church in San Francisco (where our youth group went last Sunday to make sandwiches for the thousands of hungry people who line up for a meal at Glide.) Rev. Oliveto is married to another woman. The pain and disappointment Rev. Oliveto expressed in her writing from General Conference, as United Methodists from different countries and different cultures debated the full inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transgender people into ministry was heartrending. Rev. Oliveto was one of 111 United Methodist clergy who came out, just before General Conference, publically acknowledging themselves as gay and lesbian. The Book of Discipline, our denomination's governing document, states that all individuals are of sacred worth but the practice of homosexuality "is incompatible with Christian teaching." It lists being a "self-avowed practicing" gay clergy member as a chargeable offenses under church law. Those found guilty can lose their credentials. So it was not a little thing on the part of the 111 clergy to disclose their sexual identity as General Conference began.

During the Conference there were reports that the United Methodist Church could split over this issue. People with strong and differing opinions on the issue of human sexuality feel passionately about what the bible says, and what the will of God is. Many of us, in our congregation, signed the heart on the wall as a commitment to be in prayer for our church during the Conference... that as our denominational leaders and delegates gathered, everyone would be held in the heart of God.

Yesterday I read an article by Rev. Schuyler Rhodes, a District Superintendent, who attended General Conference. He wrote reflecting on what General Conference had been. "For those of us in Christian community, reality is based, not upon stands, positions, or artificial categories, but on relationships. We are called together not because of ideological agreement but because of our common commitment to God's love in Christ Jesus. For us, the relationships we build in faith are deeper than the wounds we cause one another. They are broader than the disagreements that we will inevitably have, and they are stronger than the pull of secular culture which always tries to define us and pull us down to its level. In Christian community we belong to one another to such an extent that we are described in Romans 12 as all part of one body in Christ, and all unique, all with different functions and roles to play. More than that, we follow a Savior who takes down the 'dividing walls of hostility' (Ephesians 2:14) creating a new community of peace and harmony."

Today is Trinity Sunday, when we celebrate the Christian doctrine of the Triune nature of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, "one God in three persons". We profess that each of the persons of the Trinity are distinct yet they are of one substance or essence. Scripture doesn't contain the word Trinity nor is there an expressly formulated doctrine of the Trinity. But throughout the pages of scripture the activity of God is expressed in the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are called into community, into relationship, because God's very Self is communal and relational. In today's gospel lesson from John, Jesus has told the disciples that the wisdom and truth from the Father would be conveyed to them by the Holy Spirit, and that what was given from the Father to the Spirit would glorify the Son.

In the year 325, the Church fathers convened the Council of Nicaea, and crafted the Nicene Creed which describes Jesus as "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father". This is a confession of faith that we still say. You can find it on page 880 in the United Methodist hymnal. The Nicene Council used the term *homoousios* (which means one substance, and equal) to define the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Scholars agree that creeds were created in reaction to disagreements over the nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that these controversies were great and many, and took some centuries to be resolved. Hmmm.

Both of today's scriptures are about wisdom and truth. I believe that we are all vessels of God's wisdom and truth, and like DS Rhodes wrote, we are called to be the Body of Christ -no one of us more important than another- and that no one of us has all of the truth or all of the wisdom. Instead we all have some wisdom and experience to bring to our theology, our understanding of God, and our collective life as the Body of Christ. I don't have all the wisdom about the bible (I think that goes without saying) nor do I feel called to tell you what God's will is. But I can tell you about who God is. And we can tell each other about who God is. Our experience of God is part of our wisdom about and understanding of God.

From the book of Proverbs we hear from Wisdom... who is a playful part of the Triune God, and speaks to us about the relational nature of God. God created the world -perhaps even worlds we don't know about yet- and took delight in the creating process, delight in Wisdom's presence, and delight in humanity. We delight God. I was thinking about this yesterday, wondering if anyone in my growing-up years of faith formation

ever told me that I delight God. We know that God loves us; that's foundational to our faith. We've probably been taught that we can disappoint God. I'm pretty sure, however, that I was never told that God delights in us. I don't think that idea is an integral part of Western Protestantism. We're more familiar with the idea of a fallen world and ourselves as sinners. Would you say this with me? (Repeat it after me.) God loves me. Say it with some conviction: God loves me! Now let's say: God delights in me. Let's say: Wow. God delights... in me.

So something we know about God is that God delights in us. And from God's creative process... bringing forth land and water, mountains, fields, the heavens, we see that God took delight (and the book of Genesis confirms this) that God took great delight in everything God created. And the created world... the oceans, the redwoods, the smell of gardenias, the sight of butterflies, the honking of geese flying overhead... all this world is meant to delight you. And when you take pleasure in and notice what God has given you, it's a way to express your appreciation of God's companionship in the world all around you. So here's another thing I can tell you about God: God wants you to notice and appreciate and rejoice in God's presence. God wants your companionship. Let's say that: God wants my companionship. This is pretty groovy theology. God loves us, God delights in us, and God wants our companionship.

Jesus spoke to His disciples (who sometimes dithered between hopelessness and cluelessness) about wisdom and truth. His words are as fresh and relevant for us as they were for the first disciples. He said, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, it will guide you into all the truth." The Holy Spirit is still guiding the Church into the wisdom and truth of God. We

are still learning and growing. God is not finished with us. We are still a work in progress. We are still learning and discerning God's wisdom and truth. This is something else I can tell you about God: the Holy Spirit is still guiding us and teaching us God's ways and God's will. We're not the completed church... we're still the learning and growing church. Let's say that together as well: We are all still learning... God's ways... and God's will.

And just as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all present in this conversation Jesus had with the disciples, we are a community; with them, with the Triune God, and with each other. Like a baby bird the Church still has wet wings and wobbly legs and are yet to burst into flight. We know God... but what we know we know in part. Jesus had much to give to the young Church but they weren't ready for it. And so He trusted the Holy Spirit to gradually feed them. The Spirit continues to feed us ~ to guide us into something we don't have yet... into "all truth." Like a loving and careful parent who doesn't burden her children with too much grownup truth for them to deal with, the Spirit continues to give us the wisdom and truth we can handle.

It seems to me that the Spirit's work among United Methodist Christians, especially following our General Conference, is in maintaining relationships with each other... relationships of love and respect. We can learn relationship-advice from studying the Triune God -Father, Son and Holy Spirit- who are separate, unique, and yet One; completely interrelated. Wisdom and truth don't exist for a single person but for the community. So what we know about God, what is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit, is for our communal good.

In an article from the Washington Post, a participant at our General Conference reflected: “In an ever-more-polarized society, the United Methodist Church this week has tried to model an approach to disagreement that the U.S. political system would do well to emulate. Despite deep differences over gay marriage and whether gay men and lesbians can be ordained as clergy, we are working hard at our once-every-four-years meeting to stay united as we search for solutions. Like Americans, we United Methodists have a common history to draw upon as we persevere together. Members’ intense drive to remain together in the face of difference seems to stand out as many other once-dependable American institutions - such as our political parties - seem ready to fracture.”

And one more quote about General Conference, this one from the Reconciling Ministries website: “An outcome of the General Conference is that the Bishops submitted a proposal entitled ‘An Offering for a Way Forward.’ In that proposal the Bishops called for creation of a special commission to handle the subject of human sexuality. The commission’s work may last until the next GC, but if it completes its work before 2020, then they will call a special conference. As the commission is doing its work, the Bishops have promised to look for ways to avoid church trials and because this comes from the full council of Bishops that is an unprecedented commitment.” In their statement, the Bishops said, “We continue to hear from many people that our current Discipline contains language which is contradictory, unnecessarily hurtful, and inadequate for the variety of local, regional and global contexts.”

I started my sermon with a funny but sad commentary about hopelessness. In God, however, there is no room, and no reason, for hopelessness. One of the

comments I read over and over during General Conference was how moved people were by the sight of so many people around the tables deep in prayer together. This is our way forward.... as United Methodist Christians, as citizens of the world and of God's kingdom. We must commit ourselves to be in prayer for this world that God so loves. We must remember that what identifies us as Jesus' followers is not our doctrine, not our ideology, not our preferences or opinions... it is how we love.

John Wesley reminded the people called United Methodists, "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?" Next week I want to tell you what I love about being United Methodist.

Our prayer song, is "The Gift of Love" and found on page 408 of the United Methodist hymnal. Please stand as you're able and let's sing that together.