

Sermon ☩ May 30, 2021

John 3:1-17

Frank H. Maxwell

I begin with a somewhat long excerpt from a sermon by Pastor Roger Barnett. He wrote:

If you imagine God as the world's creator, the world's ultimate source and first cause, the Deity of the Genesis story, then try to imagine God's continuing disgust and frustration at the mess the world's creatures made of God's creation! And imagine that same Creator God saying something like:

“O.K. You've messed up what I gave you, and, if you keep on in the same way, nothing good is ever going to come of your lives or my creative genius. Ever since Eve was beguiled by that slimy serpent and Adam was dumb enough to eat that forbidden fruit, you folk have been nothing but disappointment. I don't want to destroy all I've made. I tried that once with a flood and have thought better of it. I love that creation, and I love you; but I don't like creation, and I don't like you. So I'm going to send you some practical help.”

And having said all that, God caused one man to come into the world with a plan of redemption that, once embraced, would bring some value and order to creation and straighten it up. Into this world, with angel songs and poetry and pageantry, came Jesus Christ, bearer of God's word, herald of God's way, servant of God's will.

And earth's creatures were so bad and so non-receptive that some of them killed him for his efforts. And God cried about that, but God would not be defeated by it. God sent Jesus back to earth for one final visit, just long enough to tantalize and teach his detractors and his disciples some final lessons. Then God gathered Jesus into the Divine Presence forever.

And God looked down at the creation and said to the creatures, *“All right! I created you, and now I have shown you how to live with one another in a respectful, redeeming, rewarding way. But I know you, all the way back to Eden, and I know that if you are left to your own devices, you'll make yourselves sick again on more apples and snake promises. So I'm going to set the spirit of that crucified Jesus loose in your world, forever! It will blow about like the wind. You'll not see it, but you will feel it. And that Spirit will guide you and strengthen you, prod you and inspire you.*

And there will be no excuses this time!! In the Spirit, I'll be with you, supporting and informing your good choices. You'll still be free to make choices and to make mistakes. But if you mess up this time, it won't be for any lack of help on my part. Perhaps this time you'll get it right!”

The nature of God is to love what has been created. I just read that . . . *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

The activity of God has been to create, redeem, and sustain what has been created. The earliest Christians sought to create a model, a design, a tool for understanding and thinking about the nature and activity of God. They perceived Divine Godliness coming at them from three directions, visible in a tripartite persona, encountered in three different ways.

Very carefully, they avoided the temptation to think and speak of God as three gods. Like their Hebrew ancestors, Christians remained faithfully monotheistic. In their hymns they might sing of “*God in three persons, blessed Trinity,*” but they always intended a portrayal of God as one being experienced in three aspects.

In time, Christians would speak of God as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but always one God in three dimensions. Our generation's efforts to remove gender limitations from the comprehension of God have rephrased that Trinitarian formula, changing the language but not the meaning.

You hear our little ones baptized in the name of God who created them and Christ who redeems them and the Holy Spirit who will sustain them.

God is encountered in different ways. *And . . .* we continually struggle to find the best words with which to express those encounters with God's activity.

The triangular image of God—the doctrine of the Trinity—is a tool that has been fashioned for our use. It is not found in the Bible. It is a post-biblical effort to design a way (what some call a paradigm) for thinking about God so we can then speak about God.

The Bible contains only intimations of the Trinity design, like the familiar 1st Corinthians text in which Paul recognized that there are among the Christians “*varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; varieties of service, but the same Lord; varieties of activity, but...the same God*”.

If you are a church history buff, you know that the triangular image of God was created largely by people with names like Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen. If you are not much into such history, these names are largely meaningless to you, and they need not be belabored. It is enough to say that the leading theologians of the early church are responsible for the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

It is a tool with which we may deal with the mystery of God and cut a window through which we may perceive the nature and activity of God.

The doctrine of the Trinity, God the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, is but a tool for creating a window through which we can see the nature and activity, the intent and possibility of God who created all that is, who offers to redeem it all through Jesus Christ, and who sustains it all by the ever-present Holy Spirit.

In every garage and workshop there are tools for different occasions. Some are for digging; some for drilling; some for cutting; some for raking. Some get used every day; some are occasional; some are seasonal. Regardless of the regularity of their usage, the tools are there to get the job done.

As Christians, our tool boxes are well stocked with tools for our tasks and journeys. All designed to assist us in getting our Christian jobs done promptly and well, accurately and with the greatest ease. Among our tools are hymns and poems, books and Bibles, preaching and praying, service and sacrament, music and money, concepts and conferences, doctrines and dedications, worship and work.

Among the tools is the doctrine of the Trinity . . . which, when properly and regularly used, enables us to cut a window in the mystery of God and peer in.

Strangely, we find that the window is triangular in shape, offering us a vision of God who creates, redeems, and sustains.

