

Sermon – “Wisdom’s Call”

Sunday, May 31, 2015

Scripture Readings – Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31, Romans 5:1-5

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Our first reading is from the book of Proverbs, chapter 8, verses 1 through 4 and 22 through 31. The personification of wisdom calls to the people, telling of her part in the forming of the world. Hear now God’s holy word.

*1 Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? 2 On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; 3 beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: 4 "To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.*

*22 The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. 23 Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. 24 When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. 25 Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth— 26 when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil. 27 When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, 28 when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, 29 when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, 30 then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, 31 rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race. Amen.*

Our second reading is from the book of Romans, chapter five, verses 1 through 5. In the midst of his longest and most theological work, Paul manages to articulate the heart of his faith in a few short verses: that we are justified by faith, find peace and grace through Christ, and receive God’s love through the Holy Spirit. This is the hope we hold onto. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.

*1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. This is the Word of the Lord.*

The title of the sermon: “Wisdom’s Call”

The text: “Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?” Proverbs 8:1

Let us pray: Eternal God, before the foundation of the universe, you are the triune God: the Author of creation, the Word of salvation, and the Spirit of wisdom. Guide us to all truth by your Spirit, that we may proclaim all that Christ revealed and rejoice in the glory he shared with us. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

John Calvin, foremost theologian and academic of our church, introduces his thoughts on the Trinity with these words: “We must seek a short and easy definition of the Trinity to free us from all error.” He then continues for another forty pages. Clearly, this was easier said than done. Calvin was a brilliant academic mind, and yet even he struggled to find a short, easy, and error-free definition of the Trinity.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is not a day in the church year with the excitement, celebration or name recognition of Christmas or Easter. It is less well known than Pentecost or Ash Wednesday. It has no exciting Biblical story attached, no bright moments, no ancient rituals that open our hearts to God. Its one widespread tradition is the one that Calvin himself followed: a preacher’s tendency toward desperation, terror, and long-windedness. For, you see, no Christian academic has yet been able to achieve what Calvin insisted we must do. The Trinity is so complex, so mysterious, so foundational to our faith, that we have spent two thousand years struggling to say exactly what it is. Thus far, we’ve gotten really good at coming up with what not to say—the list of Trinitarian heresies is quite lengthy. In fact, the preacher corner of the Internet this week is full of articles with headlines like “Top Ten Heresies to Avoid On Trinity Sunday.” The fear is real, people.

So this seems like an appropriately impossible intellectual topic for Baccalaureate Sunday, as we celebrate the academic achievements of our high school and college graduates. John Calvin is, as I said, the foremost theologian of the Presbyterian church, but he doesn’t have the greatest of reputations. Martin Luther has great quotable material like “Sin boldly!” Calvin has double predestination. Calvin has a reputation for being dry, strict, and thoroughly boring.

Sometimes I think the book of Proverbs suffers from a similar reputation, especially when compared to its elegant and expressive counterpart, the Psalms. Who here has actually read Proverbs? It reads, for the most part, like Advice From Your Great Aunt. Yet throughout these lists of advice runs the character of Wisdom, whom we heard from today. Wisdom, or Sophia in the Greek, is in many ways the protagonist of Proverbs. She calls out to people, she has long speeches: she is very active. And in today’s reading, we hear her tell her own story. She speaks of how she was the first of God’s creations, and existed in the beginning before the world was made. She tells of her part in the creative act, of how she was God’s master worker and God’s delight.

Now, polytheism is perhaps the greatest of heresies to fall into when discussing the Trinity, but that is not what’s happening here. Sophia is not a character on her own, nor one worshipped as a god. She is the personification of God’s wisdom, the imaginative voice given to the wisdom of God that helped shape all of creation, and which is now embedded within each part of Creation, impossible to separate. Ancient Judaism revered Lady Wisdom, and the early Christian church also had a strong Wisdom tradition, with Sophia making many appearances in early Church theology and liturgy.

Today, we still revere wisdom, in our own way. When we speak of discernment, we are talking about the process of uncovering God’s wisdom. Often, I think, we come to church to seek wisdom: wisdom about how to live our lives, how to know God, how to be good Christians and good people. And we clearly admire wisdom, for this weekend we are celebrating academic achievement and accomplishment!

Much of Proverbs may be advice from your great aunt, but today our reading from Proverbs doesn’t actually contain any proverbs. Instead, it is our reading from Romans where we hear a pithy proverb that is repeated to this day, and it is one that I know was repeated with quite great frequency during my college years, as we faced deadlines and full schedules and long papers and

new types of pressure and stress: suffering builds character. Yes, Paul said it first! This cliché is, in fact, a biblical cliché. We must boast in our suffering, Paul says, for it produces endurance. That makes sense, I think. We have another piece of wisdom about that: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Suffering produces endurance. And it is endurance, Paul tells us, that produces character, that ultimate achievement of suffering, college students tell each other.

But what exactly is character? Why might we want that? I've never been convinced that this is a reasonable trade. What exactly can we do with character once we have it? Yet character is not Paul's goal. Character is not the end point; Paul, too, doesn't seem to think character alone is enough. No, Paul tells us, this character produced by suffering is one more step along the way, for character produces hope.

HOPE. I find this so profound I am almost at a loss for words. It is not this vague sense of character that is our ultimate goal, but hope. Suffering is positive, Paul says, only in that it produces hope. Suffering—pain, sorrow, agony, all the hard parts of being human—does not produce cynicism, or pessimism, or even realism, Paul tells us, but rather suffering leads us to HOPE.

It does beg the question: hope in what? Paul doesn't answer directly. He tells us instead that this is a hope that does not disappoint us, for the love of God has already been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. So I think I'm not wrong in believing that this hope is in the Trinity. You see, I think so much of our suffering is caused by an abiding sense of loneliness, of isolation, whether in body, mind, or spirit. But the Trinity!—the Trinity declares to us that our God is a Triune God, Three who are One, One who is always in relationship and is relational, Father Son and Holy Spirit, Three held in unity, ever and eternally in relationship and inseparable.

The Trinity *is* relationship, *is* Love. And this Triune God longs for relationship with US, and has already poured love into us, love freely given.

This passage from Romans is often read on Trinity Sunday because, in five short verses, all three persons of the Trinity are mentioned: but more than mentioned, they are intimately interwoven. Try to separate out any one, God, Christ, or Spirit, to follow the precise role and task, and suddenly, I discovered this week, you are faced with countless laborious hours of theological work, endless examination of Greek prepositions, and a massive headache (trust me).

The Three Persons of the Trinity, Father Son and Holy Spirit, refuse to be separated, for they are Three and yet One: eternally and intimately in relationship.

And *this* is what we have hope in:

Hope in a God who, though One, is never alone.

And hope that this Triune God draws us into relationship, too—longing for us to live in intimate connection, to be a relational people.

Going off to college and graduating from college both can be times of great suffering, for they can be times of profound loneliness and isolation. Embarking on new adventures, whether those be college, graduate school, or careers, is often a time when we leave behind the relationships that have sustained us, the communities that have formed us and held us.

The piece of wisdom I can give you is the wisdom at the heart of all creation, and is Advice from Our Great Uncle Paul—hold onto the hope that will never disappoint us: the eternal and ever-present love we know through the Triune God.

I believe this is the deepest wisdom we can seek, for this is the wisdom that was there in the beginning, before the forming of the world, and is the wisdom embedded within all the works of God's hands: the already fulfilled hope that God delights in us, and loves us, and longs for us to be drawn into relationship with God, with self, and with others.

And the best hope of all: we don't even have to do that much seeking, for does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? Has not God's love already been poured out into our hearts?

In his forty pages, Calvin, even with his brilliant mind, never could find a short and easy and error-free definition of the Trinity. For the wisdom of the Trinity is a wisdom beyond academics and intellect: it is a wisdom of the heart, of connection, of a love that exists in perfect relationship. This wisdom calls to us whether we are a part of higher education or not. Wisdom seeks us out wherever we are, drawing us into the perfect and eternal community of the Triune God.

So what is left for us to do?—it is left to us to respond: to not be paralyzed by loneliness or isolation, but to live into that divine fellowship; to tune our hearts to sing the grace of intimacy in which we stand; and to structure our lives toward the building of relationship with all people, so that wisdom might call through us to others, inviting all into the mystery, hope, and delight of the eternal and unbroken community we know through the Triune God.

Amen.