

## Trinity and the power of words

Trinity 2C—May 22, 2016

*[This transcript was meant for a spoken performance. It is not optimized for a reading experience.]*

*She will glorify me since all she tells you will be taken from what is mine.*

Will you pray with me? Come Holy Spirit, may we experience the unseen Divine in our very breath from our beginnings to our endings. Amen. May this be so!

Let me begin today with a quote from my go to theologian and liturgist Rex Hunt:

*Every time the church calendar comes round to Trinity Sunday,  
I confess to giving a sigh of disappointment.*

*The reason for my sigh is that for me, Trinity Sunday symbolizes all the failures of  
institutionalized Christianity.*

For Rex, Trinity Sunday has become an “empty cocoon”—empty because the life which shaped it has long since departed.

For Rex, the Doctrine of the Trinity has become a mathematical formula, much like  $E=mc^2$  that Einstein told us was the clue to the physical universe.

But when I read some of the more creative biblical scholars of our day, I learn that the doctrine was created to describe, define and safeguard an experience. But in the process of time, the experience seems to have been drained right out, and what we have left is just the formula—as if this was what being a Christian is.

Personally, I have to say I agree with Rex Hunt. I do not get excited at the whole idea of Trinity or Trinity Sunday. This is the only Sunday in the year when we celebrate a doctrine, a theological thought of God in three persons.

I went through all my files to glean some insight into what I might have preached about the Trinity and in all of my files, notes and whatnots, I found absolutely zilch. I rarely preach on Trinity Sunday. I think Nicole has gotten stuck with the Trinity, most years. As for me, I had nothing.

Let's see what we can hoist up the flagpole today.

Most of you were not around in the 1960s, so the name John Robinson means very little to you. Let me give you some backstory to John. He was an Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, England.

Think conservative, ritualistic, formulated England.

Robinson was also a writer. In 1963, his book *HONEST TO GOD* was released and the response was seismic! Robinson challenged Christianity, challenged Christians to rethink that which was held to be true.

Robinson wrote in *HONEST TO GOD* that having rejected the idea of “God up there”, modern secular man—well, 1960s secular man and woman—also had to recognize that the idea of “God out there” is also outdated.

Let me slow down a bit so you can catch what he was writing. He was saying that the God up there... up above, beyond the clouds, is rejected. One can look and look into the skies for as long as one wishes and one will not see God.

That idea was already emerging in Christianity early in the 1960s. Robinson takes the reader one step further. He wrote that we also need to recognize that the idea of “God out there” is also outdated and a simplification of the nature of divinity.

What Robinson offered was the idea that Christians should take their cue from the existentialist theology of Paul Tillich and consider God to be “the ground of our being”.

Back in the 60s, this was scandalous and heretical thinking. To publish such works was held as blasphemy. You can imagine how many hate letters the Bishop received. The book was almost universally condemned by traditionalists but was also hailed as fresh air by some liberal thinkers.

Someone once asked the Bishop, “How would you teach a child the doctrine of the Trinity?” He replied, “It was one of the easiest questions I have ever received. The answer was: ‘I wouldn’t.’”

How would you teach the doctrine of the Trinity? I wouldn’t.

That makes this easy. [*Pretending to flip the page*] Our offertory hymn is—

—Hang on, let’s work with this a little bit longer.

You have heard me, two weeks ago, throw shade on the council of Nicene. Roman emperor Constantine was seeking absolute political power. To have absolute power would mean he would need unity. To get unity, he needed to align what was, at the time, four territories. To align the four, he needed to bring together the Christian movement which, by the fourth century, had migrated into all areas of the territories.

This movement, as I have said in the past, was not an organized religion. One community did not mirror another community. Those in the east might have been vastly different from those, say, from the west and yet, as different as they might have been one from another, they all held the idea and the experience that the one called Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Messiah.

Constantine needed unity. With so many diverse expressions of Christian faith, there was bound to be disagreement and controversy. The council was meant to create and solidify unity. The council was meant to establish orthodoxy. In other words, the council was setting what was to be considered right, true and straight.

The council wrestled with the idea of the divinity of Christ. They even fought over what day Easter would be celebrated. Constantine was far more interested in politics than the Divine. We can stand here in this century and be critical of the fourth-century antics of the Church. Hindsight is always clearer than foresight.

There is something else going on. The council is wrestling with how to express the experience of the Divine.

Can you fathom sitting in a room with 200 people and trying to put into words, common words, agreed-upon words, your experience of Jesus Christ?

The early church fathers (women were not included in the council), wanted to capture an experience. What was the experience? The experience was the ongoing spirit of Jesus Christ. The ongoing spirit.

How does one describe the power of the spirit? If you didn't come to Eastminster United last Sunday, you missed my imagery of Spirit—oh, and yes, the wild goose in my suitcase.

Consider this: how does one understand the actions of the first-century Roman execution? That action, that crucifixion of Jesus, catapulted a rebellious, itinerate wandering storyteller into future consciousness.

The few followers that surrounded Jesus in those early years were absolutely devastated. They were so devastated, as we have read, that they were frozen in fear.

To them, dead was dead. They might have heard of the concept of life after death and resurrection but those were foreign ideas, alien concepts.

Something shifted within the post-execution followers. Dead was dead and, yet, there was something in the experience of their teacher that stirred within.

Dead was dead and yet they could not forget. They began to remember not just the words but also the relationship they experienced with this Jesus.

Jesus offered hope in a world that held little hope. Jesus spoke of light in a time of great darkness. Jesus held out life beyond the systems that sought to destroy.

They remembered and, in their remembering, they began to share.

In the sharing, others experienced hope, light and life.

In the relationships that they formed,

Christ who had lived

was the Christ who had died

and the Christ who had come again.

*In the relationship with one another, in the relationship with the world, they experienced God.*

Let me say that again from a different angle because I have it italicized. In relationship with one another, in relationship with the world,

we experienced God.

The council of Nicaea, three centuries after the death of Jesus, was trying to capture and formulate the thoughts and words of the Christ-follower communities. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit is what they hammered out. God in three persons, the Holy Trinity.

So what do this theology and scant history lesson have to do or say to us today? What relevance does John's gospel reading have to us in 2016?

The Holy, Divine, God, Father, Mother, Creator, Son, Brother, Ghost, Spirit cannot be captured in mere words. God is in the details. God is in the details. What are the details? To experience the divine is to experience relationship.

This is the Christian way, this is that ancient sacred path lived in the here and now. Following the way of Jesus is to be in relationship with one another. The way of Christ is experienced in relationship.

Sam Keen, with whom I spent a glorious weekend in California four years ago, said, *“Everyone today says they are ‘spiritual’ not religious. What they are conveying to you is that they do not have the discipline to be religious.”* They do not have the discipline to be religious.

To be religious, as a Christian, means to step into this mysterious quagmire called “the church”.

John Robinson’s book was scandalous and heretical in the 1960s.

Do you know the expression that everything old becomes new again? I knew I should have saved my plaid bell-bottom pants!

I am talking about books and thoughts, scandal and heresy.

Robinson wrote the book **HONEST TO GOD** and people went batcrap crazy.

53 years after Robinson’s book:

Gretta Vosper, my colleague in ministry, has written two books: *WITH OR WITHOUT GOD: WHY THE WAY WE LIVE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN WHAT WE BELIEVE*, followed by her book *AMEN: WHAT PRAYER CAN MEAN IN A WORLD BEYOND BELIEF*.

Hear what she writes in *AMEN*:

*The church the future needs, is one of people gathering to share and recommit themselves to loving relationships with themselves, their families, the wider community, and the planet.*

*Such a church need not fear the discoveries of science, history, archaeology, psychology, or literature; it will only be enhanced by such discoveries.*

*Such a church need not avoid the implications of critical thinking for its message ; it will only become more effective. Such a church need not cling to and justify a particular source for its authority; it will draw on the wisdom of the ages and challenge divisive and destructive barriers.*

On June 15, Gretta will go on trial, before a conference group who are challenging her fitness to ministry.

Gretta had the audacity to use one word, one verbal construct; that word was and is atheist. You may know that many today have gone batcrap crazy over that word. From where I stand, this is a no-win situation. If the gathered United Church council says yes or no to Gretta, one side or the other is going to be angered.

The Council of Nicea, the power of the Roman Emperor way back then, still has impact here and now.

You and I need to remember that the Christian movement, back then and today, is still radical and revolutionary.

I agree with Gretta's statement that I just quoted.

I think—I am guessing—Jesus taught that his followers were not alone. You are not alone. That is the message: you are not alone. We are in this together. Whether we agree or disagree with one another, we are in this experience together.

To experience the mystery, the cognitive construct, the words triune God, Trinity is an invitation to step into relationship, step and engage deeper into community.

Look around this is community. Are you ready willing and able to experience more? Do you still have the courage? Do you still have the audacity to leave the security of this space, of our traditions, our ideas and be in relationship and engaged with the world outside? The world is waiting for you. The world is waiting because this is good news indeed.