

"Questions and Faith"

The Holy Trinity
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Sunday, May 30, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

John 16:12-15

Someone has compiled a list of what they called "Kid's Instructions on Life." Some of these are quite insightful. For instance:

"Wear a hat when feeding seagulls." – Rocky, age 9.

"Sleep in your clothes so you'll be dressed in the morning." – Stephanie, age 8.

"Never ask for anything that costs more than \$5 when your parents are doing taxes." – Carol, age 9.

"Never tell your mom her diet's not working." – Michael, age 14.

"Don't pick on your sister when she's holding a baseball bat." – Joel, age 12.

"When you get a bad grade in school, show it to your mom when she's on the phone." – Alysha, age 13.

And finally, "Never try to baptize a cat." – Laura, age 13.

There's some pretty good advice there, don't you think? We all need advice at times in our lives. We are really in the same boat as the disciples were as Jesus prepared to leave them. So, he says in John 16: 12, the first verse of our text for this morning, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." Another translation records it, "but you can't understand it now."

Well, let's be honest – there are some things in this life we will never understand. Try as hard as we might, there are things in this world that go beyond our ability to grasp.

Do we need examples? Husbands, do you understand your wives all the time? We can easily turn that question around and ask it the other way. How about understanding your children, or your parents, or even ourselves at times? St. Paul said it centuries ago: "the things I should do I do not, and the things I shouldn't do, those I do." And none of us knows exactly why. There is a lot in this world that we do not comprehend.

And there are times when I'd really like answers to some of my more serious and deeper questions. Like, why do good people suffer, and why do bad people seem to prosper? Why do some people become successful while others from the same family never seem to get their acts together? Why did my little friend Nick, age 8, get that awful cancer and die?

Questions about life -- we all have them. And that is why it has always confounded me that the church has seen fit to add to its liturgical calendar a Sunday we call Holy Trinity. The trinity is without a doubt one of the most difficult theological concepts we have to teach in the church, so what do we do, we make it a celebration on a Sunday and watch as pastors struggle to explain it's mystery. How can God be three and yet one? How could the babe of Bethlehem at the same time be the triune God above?

From Irenaeus in the second century through Augustine in the fifth up to the present day, the church has struggled to explain the mystery and profoundness of this doctrine. Our historical creeds, the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian, were forged in hot debate over the issue of how to articulate what we mean by the Holy Trinity of God. I even read this week in preparation for this sermon of someone who defined it as "the perfect simplicity of unity and the fathomless complexity of diversity." That may be descriptive, but it is not helpful, at least not to me.

Someone has wisely said that if you fully understand the Trinity, you'll lose your mind. But if you deny the Trinity, you'll lose your soul.

That may be a little strong, but there is truth in it. We are not saved by our theology after all. We are saved by our relationship with the Risen Christ. We are not saved by our thoughts, or beliefs, or actions, but we are saved by what God has done for us in the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus the Christ. But still, it is a little embarrassing as a pastor to admit that at the heart of our faith is a concept none of us can adequately explain.

So, if the first thing we admit today is that there are things in this world we cannot understand, and particularly things of the faith, the second thing we can acknowledge is that we can know everything we need to know.

We live by grace, after all, not by knowledge. God does not expect us to understand the mysteries of this world. But God will show us what is necessary for us to know so that we can live happy, productive and joyous lives.

And he did that by sending first his Son, who then, when he was about to leave this world, told his disciples, "When the Holy Spirit, who is truth, comes, he shall guide you into all truth, for he will not be presenting his own ideas, but will be passing on to you what he has heard from the Father. And he will declare to you the things that are to come." You recognize those words as part of our Gospel text this morning.

Now, Jesus could not have meant that the Holy Spirit would tell us everything there is to know. It is obvious that no one, regardless of how full they may be of the Holy Spirit or how wise, can answer all the questions of life. But every believer, regardless of how brilliant or how humble, knows what he or she needs to know -- that this Jesus of Nazareth came into the world, that he served as a model of a life of love and caring, that he died a painful death, but rose again on the third day,

and that he lives forever at the right hand of God. And we know that when Christ left this world, the Father bestowed upon those who believed in him the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that wherever we might be, and whatever we might endure, we would know in our heart of hearts that God is with us.

That, my friends in Christ, is the very heart of the Gospel. We are not saved by how much we know. We are not saved by our abilities to explain the mystery of the trinity. We are saved by what God has done in Christ for us. We don't know or understand everything, but we know everything that is essential.

And so, we come to the third part of our formula for today. After the questions, after our understanding of who Jesus is for us, comes faith. We live by faith; it's as simple and as complex as that.

Living by faith is not living without questions. Living by faith means living through the questions and without reservation. Living by faith involves staking our very lives on the promises of God, that Jesus died and rose for me, and that the Holy Spirit is a gift in my life, given at baptism, who will sustain and guide and nurture me through this life and in the world to come.

Let me tell you about a little girl who discovered a great secret from her grandparents. Ever since she could remember, her grandparents had played this secret little game. They would leave the word "Shmily" – "S-H-M-I-L-Y" – around the house for one another. Grandfather would stuff little notes with the word "Shmily" in Grandmother's sock drawer. Grandmother would trace the word "Shmily" in the steam on the bathroom mirror so Grandfather would see it when he took his morning shower. Over the years, they competed to see who could find the most creative way to leave a "Shmily" note for the other. And when Grandmother lost her ten-year fight against cancer, her casket was wreathed with a huge bouquet of flowers. And on the yellow ribbon around the bouquet was that one word, "Shmily." The thing that held her grandparents' marriage together, the thing that nourished them in life and sustained them in death: "Shmily." What does Shmily mean? S-h-m-i-l-y: "See how much I love you."

And that, my friends, is the message that sustains us in this question-filled world. It is the caption that the believer sees attached to every cross: See how much I love you, signed, God.

As a pastor I struggle to find the answers to your questions about life and about God and about the faith. But as I stand at your gravesides facing grief, and as I struggle to find words to preach that make sense of an often senseless world; as I lay awake at night praying about the pain some of you know and have known, I come face to face with my own humanity and the fact that there are questions that none of us will ever be able to answer on this side of the grave. And so, all I can do is what you call me to do, and that is to take you to the foot of the cross, point to it and say, everything you need to know is here. See how much God loves you. And although it may not satisfy all our questions, it is all we ever need to

remember. "See how much I love you," exclaims God, with an exclamation mark in the sign of a cross so we will always know.

AMEN.